

## **Online Impulsive Shopping (Problematic and Pathological)**

It may be very difficult for a person suffering from hoarding disorder to avoid the lure of late-night shopping channels or internet deals. The dizzying rush that you may feel from the instant availability of any item that attracts you is the same as a traditional in-store shopping impulse. “Great deals” lure you in and urge you to purchase now. The buyer’s remorse and anxiety you feel the next day is also the same as the regret felt after in-store impulse shopping except that it is far more convenient. As such, a problematic online shopping habit requires different coping and treatment strategies to be successful.

According to a recent study (Trotzke et al. 2015) to determine how to categorize online pathological shopping and whether it is similar to impulse control disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or gambling addiction, scientists investigated *cue reactivity* (excitability from shopping cues), which constitute the emotional and motivational basis for experiencing a craving (Drummond 2000; Franken 2003). A craving is commonly described as the irresistible desire to consume a substance and is associated with drug seeking and relapse (Drummond 2001). The cue reactivity and craving concept has been transferred to behavioral addictions such as gambling, online gaming, and cybersex use (Sodano and Wulfert 2010; Laier et al. 2013; Brand et al. 2011; Thalemann, Wölfling, and Grüsser 2007).

## **Factors that Make People Vulnerable to Online Shopping Addiction**

The study found *three key factors* that made people especially vulnerable to an online shopping addiction (Wei 2015):

1. *Preferring to buy anonymously and avoid social interaction.* There is an overlap between pathological impulsive buying and anxiety, especially *social anxiety*. For people who

don't comfortably tolerate crowded malls or the social interaction at the checkout counter, buying online may seem like the perfect solution, but it actually increases the incentive for an individual to avoid social interaction.

People with pathological impulsive shopping behaviors often feel shame and regret about their shopping and seek to hide their online shopping habits. The anonymity and privacy of online shopping can make this worse.

2. *Enjoying a wide variety and constant availability of items.* It's not surprising that online shopping cultivates satisfaction in people who like a great deal of variety and want to have the latest model of what attracts them. Added to the attraction is the fact that online stores never close. This can lead to more frequent indulgence of a person's cravings for shopping.
3. *Seeking instant gratification.* People who seek immediate gratification are drawn to online shopping, where purchases are one click away. The quick satisfaction feeds into the cycle of cravings and rewards.

In addition to these factors, online shopping websites and shopping channel ads *are designed to compound the problem* in several ways:

- Online auction sites and television ads are designed to create a sense of urgency. Often the online site includes a countdown of the time left before the deal expires, or ads show a countdown of the number of items left at the unbelievable sale price. This marketing strategy leads to anxiety and an overwhelming urge to purchase *now*, before you can take a breath and recognize that the best decision for you at this time is to move yourself forward toward the person you deserve to be.

- Sites cue induced craving (Trotzke et al. 2014). To cue you to increased craving, when you browse for a product online, targeted ads and sponsored ads start popping up in your browser soon after. Businesses try to capitalize on your initial interest by providing you with cues to get you to click for a closer look at their product. If your initial interest was based on a craving for the item, it can quickly turn into an irresistible urge to purchase.
- Robert LaRose and Matthew S. Eastin (2002) found that although online retail websites have features that encourage self-regulation (e.g., shopping carts to contain products before purchase and therefore allowing time to consider; search engine opportunities to find and evaluate information; and past purchase history to trigger awareness of buying behavior), these were outweighed by website features such as advertising pop-ups, timed discount offers, vivid interactive graphical displays of products, and “one click” purchases, all of which encourage purchasing and weaken self-regulation (see also Rose and Dhandayudham 2014).

Many of us enjoy the convenience and immediacy of online shopping, so how is pathological impulsive online buying different from the average shopper’s behavior? According to Marlynn Wei (2015), people with pathological impulsive buying issues feel preoccupied with shopping and feel like they have no control over it, even if it leads to severe work or relationship problems or financial bankruptcy.

### **10 Signs of Compulsive Online Shopping**

1. I feel like I can’t stop online shopping even if I wanted to, or I have tried to stop without being able to.
2. Online shopping has hurt my relationships, work, or financial situation.

3. My partner, family members, or friends are concerned about my online shopping. I end up in arguments with them over it.
4. I think about online shopping all the time.
5. I get grumpy or upset if I can't shop online.
6. Online shopping is the only thing that helps me relax or feel better.
7. I hide things that I buy because I'm afraid other people will think it's unreasonable or a waste of money.
8. I often feel *guilty* after I go online shopping.
9. I spend less time doing other things that I enjoy because of the time and money spent online shopping.
10. I often buy things that I don't need or much more than I planned, even when I can't afford it.

If you think you may have a problem, Wei (2015) provides some additional tests for shopping addiction: the Compulsive Buying Scale (Valence, D'Astous, and Fortier 1988) and the Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale (Andreassen et al. 2015).

Pathological impulsive buying can also be tied to or worsened by other psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, hoarding, or mania. Treating the underlying issue can help improve the buying behavior if it stems from another disorder. For pathological impulsive buying itself, the standard treatment is cognitive behavioral therapy with a mental health professional.

## Strategies to Deal with Online Shopping

There is no easy answer to online shopping habits because online shopping is numbingly easy and available. Marketing strategies are designed to make even the tawdriest bobble look like the crown jewels or a solution to your everyday life problems.

First, let's look at the obvious.

1. Why is the shopping channel or online retail websites your viewing choice of the day?
2. What is stopping you from turning off the TV or internet or at least changing the channel or website?
3. When you want a down-time activity, what other choices do you have? List these other choices and work yourself down the list to provide variety and get unstuck.
4. Who have you not connected with in a while? Turn off the TV or internet and try writing, calling, or emailing them instead. Nothing you see or purchase online from the shopping channel cares about you the way the people in your life do, even if relationships have drifted. Be sure to ask the people you contact how things are going for them first.

Everyone has a story and needs someone to lighten the load by being a good listener.

Then be willing to share with them.

5. Are you a night-owl shopper? Make a contract with yourself: No shopping after 7 pm or when you are bored, feeling down, or need something you can't identify.
6. No matter what the item, make a contract with yourself to take notes on it.
  - Put yourself on pause for 24-48 hours and then decide how handy or problem solving the item really is. *Never* buy the same day you get excited about a new purchase if shopping has ever been a problem for you.

- Ask yourself what the priority problems, frustrations, irritations, longings are for you at this moment in your life and do a pros and cons list of how these desired acquisitions will solve these issues for you.
- Make a list of your problems, frustrations, irritations, and longings and spend your TV or internet time developing a list in the next column of what you can do about each. Use the “Figuring It Out” tool to decide what you need to do to solve these issues and get the help you need to make the progress you desire.
- Remember, your willingness and ability to stay on pause is being deliberately tested by online shopping marketing strategies in the hopes that the suggestibility of their advertising will wear you down and you will buy or express greater interest by going online to further research details and eventually buy their products.

7. Reread the “10 Signs of Compulsive Online Shopping.” These signs are also true for problem shopping offline.

Remember you are worth not letting yourself get propelled by your feelings of impulsive necessity or possible usefulness. Be the driver and decide your own best path.