

# PHYSIOLOGY OF ONOMANIA (SHOPPING ADDICTION)

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Shopping Addiction, also known as “onomania”, is a disorder wherein a person has a compulsive desire to shop excessively—often resulting in a impulsive or uncontrollable purchasing behaviour. A person with this addiction may have an overwhelming urge to purchase items even though it is not a necessity to them or even if they couldn’t afford it. This addiction can lead to financial problems, emotional distress, and can affect negatively on their relationships.

## Characteristics of Onomania

1. **Compulsive Buying:** Shopping addicts have an uncontrollable urge to stop, which can frequently result to buy things they don’t need, and the act of shopping itself becomes a way to cope with negative emotions such as anxiety stress or boredom.
2. **Emotional Relief:** People addicted to shopping use shopping as a way to cope with emotional distress as it gives a temporary emotional boost or sense of fulfillment—but this is often short-lived. This is a repetitive cycle that people with onomania experience as they use to feel better.
3. **Loss of Control:** Shop addicts are aware of the negative

consequences, but still find it difficult to control their behavior. This leads to them over-spending.

4. **Financial Problems:** Shopping addiction can lead to debt, maxed-out credit cards, and struggling financially due to excessive spending on non-essential items.
5. **Strained Relationships:** This addiction can lead to harming their relationships with their loved ones as addicts may hide purchases, lie about their spending, or prioritize shopping over their responsibilities to their loved ones.
6. **Guilt and Regret:** A feeling of guilt and regret after shopping can lead to a cycle of emotional highs during shopping and lows after shopping (e.g. due to the amount spent).

## Neurobiological Mechanisms

- **Dopamine and Reward System**
  - Dopamine Release: When a person engages in shopping, especially impulsively, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. This release creates a temporary feeling of euphoria, reinforcing the behavior.
  - Reward Pathways: The brain's reward pathways, particularly in the **ventral tegmental area (VTA)** and the nucleus accumbens, are activated during shopping, creating a "high." This feeling can become

addictive, motivating individuals to seek out the behavior repeatedly

- **Prefrontal Cortex Dysfunction**

- The prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and self-regulation, can show reduced activity in individuals with shopping addiction. This leads to poor judgment and difficulty resisting the urge to shop, despite knowing the negative consequences. Reduced prefrontal activity results in weaker inhibition of impulsive behaviors, making it harder to regulate spending urges.

- **Amygdala and Emotional Regulation**

- The **amygdala**, a region involved in processing emotions, plays a role in driving shopping addiction. Emotional stressors like anxiety, loneliness, or depression can trigger shopping as a coping mechanism.
- Shopping provides temporary emotional relief by engaging the brain's reward system, which temporarily alleviates negative emotions. However, this relief is short-lived, and individuals may return to shopping for emotional comfort, reinforcing the cycle.

- **Habit formation and the Striatum**

- The dorsal striatum, which is involved in habit formation, becomes activated through repetitive shopping behavior. This leads to the development of compulsive buying

patterns, where shopping becomes a habitual response to stress or emotional discomfort. Over time, shopping behaviors become more automatic, driven by habit rather than conscious decision-making.

- **Serotonin and Mood Regulation**

- **Serotonin Dysfunction:** Like other forms of addiction, shopping addiction may involve serotonin dysregulation, which affects mood and impulse control. Low serotonin levels have been linked to increased impulsivity and mood disorders, which can make individuals more vulnerable to compulsive shopping as a means of self-soothing.

### **Signs of Shopping Addiction**

- Shopping as a “coping mechanism” as the addicts use it to relieve stress or feel better.
- Frequently buying things you don't need or didn't plan to buy.
- Having the feeling of regret or guilt every after purchases, but still continuing to shop.
- Lying about or hiding purchases from others, especially loved ones.
- Financial problems resulting from excessive spending.

### **Consequences of Shopping Addiction (Onomania)**

- **Emotional Toll** - Guilt, regret, anxiety, and shame often follow shopping sprees, leading to an emotional spiral that drives further compulsive shopping.

- **Financial Strain** - Debt and financial instability are common consequences, potentially leading to long-term economic hardship.
- **Social Impact** - Relationships with family, friends, and significant others can suffer due to dishonesty, secretive behaviour, and neglect of financial responsibilities.
- **Legal Issues** - Excessive debt might lead to legal actions, such as lawsuits or wage garnishment, from creditors attempting to recover their money.
- **Physical Consequences** - The anxiety and guilt associated with shopping addiction can lead to physical health problems, such as high blood pressure, headaches, and sleep disorders.

### Treatment for Onomania

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**
  - CBT is one of the most effective treatments for shopping addiction. It helps individuals recognize and change unhealthy thought patterns and behaviors that lead to compulsive shopping.
- **Financial Counseling**
  - Working with a financial advisor or counselor can help individuals create realistic budgets, manage debt, and set up spending limits. Financial counseling may involve creating repayment plans for outstanding debts and helping individuals regain financial stability.

- **Mindfulness and Stress Management**

- Techniques such as mindfulness meditation, deep breathing exercises, and yoga can help individuals become more aware of their emotional triggers and reduce impulsive behavior.

- **Pharmacotherapy**

- In cases where shopping addiction is linked to underlying mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), antidepressants (such as SSRIs) may be prescribed to help stabilize mood and reduce compulsive behaviors.
- In some cases, medications that stabilize mood, particularly if the addiction is tied to bipolar disorder or significant mood swings, can be helpful.

- **Setting Boundaries**

- Individuals may work with therapists or family members to create behavioral contracts, which outline limits on spending and shopping. These contracts can be reinforced with rewards for adherence and consequences for lapses.

- **Lifestyle Changes**

- Replacing shopping with healthier activities, such as exercise, socializing, or pursuing new hobbies, can help individuals fill the emotional void that shopping once occupied. Developing new ways to cope with stress or emotional pain, such as journaling, therapy, or creative

outlets, reduces the reliance on shopping as a stress-reliever.

## **Conclusion**

Shopping addiction, or onomania, is more than just a habit—it's a complex, compulsive behavior that can deeply affect someone's emotional, financial, and social well-being. While shopping can feel like a quick escape from stress or sadness, the relief is fleeting, often replaced by guilt, anxiety, and even debt. The cycle of chasing that temporary "high" from buying something new can spiral out of control, leading to damaged relationships, financial instability, and emotional strain.

But, like all addictions, there is hope. Recognizing the problem is the first step, and with the right support—whether it's through therapy, support groups, or loved ones—it's possible to regain control. The journey to recovery may not be easy, but by addressing the emotional triggers and building healthier habits, individuals can break free from the hold that compulsive shopping has on their lives. Shopping shouldn't be a way to fill emotional voids—it should be a choice, not a compulsion.

## **References:**

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