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## Finance

# When bargain hunting is an addiction

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For some people, the rush of a great deal trumps practical considerations -- such as whether they need, want or even have a place to keep what they've found on sale.

By Melinda Fulmer

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The siren song of the clearance rack is hard to resist. For some people, it's impossible.

For New Mexico schoolteacher Marie Barger, bargain shopping was an addiction as powerful as drugs or alcohol -- one that took her seven years to pay off. Years after her husband took away her maxed-out credit cards, she still comes across old purchases that make her cringe, such as the full-figured adult size 16 uniform pants she bought for her tiny 12-year-old daughter simply because they were 80% off.

"She's superskinny. Maybe if she got pregnant one day she could wear them," Barger says.

Psychologist April Lane Benson, the editor of the book "[I Shop, Therefore I Am](#)," says she has seen the compulsion of spending money to save money break up marriages and force people into bankruptcy.

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In a 2006 study in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 5.8% of 2,513 phone survey respondents were classified as compulsive spenders, split almost equally between men and women. But the study's authors say as much as 16% of the adult U.S. population might fit into this category.

A large part of these compulsive spenders are bargain addicts -- people who can't pass up a good sale even if it's on something they don't want, need or even particularly like. For these people, what they buy is not as important as how much that item's price has been reduced.

Scoring deals helps these out-of-control shoppers ease their insecurities and feel more competent and in control, says Tim Kasser, an associate professor of psychology at Knox College in Illinois and the author of "[The High Price of Materialism](#)."

Unlike other types of out-of-control spenders, bargain addicts rationalize their purchases as something good they are doing for themselves, their children, their spouse or others, Benson says.

"It feels as though they are saving money, so it's hard to pass up," she says.

### **Drowning in bargains**

This daily deal hunting can have serious consequences. One of Benson's support-group clients lost her home to foreclosure, was two years behind on her taxes and cashed out her retirement plan to settle shopping debts. She routinely spent hundreds of dollars on things she thought were good buys. She even plunked down \$3,000 on marked-down clothing for children she didn't have.

"They can never get enough of what they don't need," Benson says of shopping addicts.

Barger knew she had a spending problem. She had about \$35,000 in credit card debt alone. But she never realized what effect it was having on her emotions and family life until one day shortly after her credit cards were taken away. She desperately wanted to hit a department store sale but had nothing in her wallet to buy with. She broke down and started sobbing. It was this event that made Barger realize how deep her "need" for this hobby was.

"I told my husband, 'I think I'm a shopaholic.' I told him I was basically going into the DTs" from not shopping.

Stacey, a stay-at-home mother who asked that only her first name be used, says her husband's

obsession with hitting going-out-of-business sales and clearance racks for bargain automotive accessories, tools, books, batteries and DVDs caused a lot of tension. He even did it when both of them were out of work and their unemployment benefits had run out.

"He would say, 'Come out to the car and see what I bought,'" Stacey recalls. In his trunk there would be 13 boxes of stuff. The idea, Stacey says, was that he could resell these items on eBay or Craigslist for a profit, but that never happened.

Instead, the items stayed boxed up and were moved each time the couple changed residences.

"I paid shipping to move these boxes," Stacey says, fuming. She never knew how much shopping her husband had actually done -- because he had spent only about \$500 over a long stretch -- until she finally unpacked the last dozen boxes from their last move.

"The stuff could have filled a one-car garage. He just can't resist a deal," Stacey says. Debt counsellors say many compulsive shoppers don't even recognize their problem when the bags and boxes start stacking up around the house or the bills start draining bank accounts. It takes some big event -- a divorce, new baby, lost job or retirement -- to realize there's a problem. Or they simply max out their credit cards and have nothing left to spend with.

"They insist everybody is doing it," says Sandy Shore, a senior counsellor with non-profit credit group Novadebt. "They had no choice, or they overspent but didn't feel like it was a bad choice at the time."

Here are six telltale signs of bargain junkies:

- They hit sales and clearance racks when they feel angry or down.
- They spend more than they can afford.
- They see sales as opportunities they can't pass up.
- They feel guilty about their shopping and hide their purchases.
- They spend so much time tracking down deals that their time with family and friends is compromised.
- They routinely forget what they bought and find things in their closets unused.

Unlike other addictions such as drugs or alcohol, compulsive shopping can't be treated cold turkey. In our culture, people can't stop buying altogether. Groceries must be purchased, clothing and shoes replaced every so often and birthday and Christmas gifts bought. But compulsive bargain hunters can learn to wean themselves from their reliance on shopping to feel good.

Simply denying themselves everything won't work, debt experts say, because invariably people will fill this need one way or another.

"Maybe you didn't buy the pocketbook or shoes," Shore says. Then when you go to the grocery store, "you buy the expensive imported cheese, and you say, 'Yeah, but I have to eat.'"

### **How to break the cycle**

The first step for anyone who thinks he or she might have a problem should be to track purchases for two weeks -- down to the penny, Shore says. Though Microsoft Money, Quicken and other computer programs can help, they don't show the impulse buys from the supermarket or the fast food and Starbucks coffee bought with cash.

Moreover, when a compulsive shopper is lined up at the cash register or electronic checkout with some tempting sale item, that person should ask himself or herself:

- Do I need it?
- How will I pay for it?
- What will I do with it?
- Where will I put it?
- What would happen if I waited?

Barger says that when she wants something, she now gives herself 72 hours before she starts doing research to see where it can be found for the best price.

"Then I make myself save for it," she says.

For better or worse, experts say, shopping has become so ingrained in our culture and identity that it's hard for most people to stop.

"Shopping," says Benson, "is the way we search for ourselves and our place in the world."

Breaking the bargain addiction can take some time. A good start, experts suggest, is to find activities that seem to satisfy the same needs:

If you bond with friends over shopping, team up with them instead on an effort or a cause you are passionate about.

If feeling thrifty makes you feel good, try rounding up supplies for a charity.

If the thrill of discovery is your thing, Benson says, find a lecture on a new cutting-edge subject or check out a neighbourhood you haven't seen before.

If shopping gives you a sense of competence, develop your other strengths and talents. What were you good at and what did you enjoy when you were younger? Anytime the urge to shop strikes, turn to other activities you enjoy or would like to become better at, such as painting, dancing or playing the piano.

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