

community Pathways

Healthcare information and wellness tips for healthy lifestyles and better living.

Vol. XXI



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The Epidemic of Affluenza:

Does Keeping Up With the Joneses Really Make Us Happier?

What's the biggest past-time in America? No, it's not baseball, or football or any other sport for that matter. - but shopping! Madonna sings the praises of being a material girl. A popular t-shirt brand boasts the slogan "He who dies with the most toys...wins" and a large section of the population proclaim shopping to be an actual hobby (right up there with stamp collecting and skiing.) Americans have the urge to splurge and currently spend more time in shopping malls than in churches on Sunday mornings. But does he who dies with the most toys really win? Does the person who spends the most, has the biggest house, the fanciest car and the most glittery of jewels really win anything? The answer, surprisingly, is no. In the case of the t-shirt, he who dies with the most doesn't win, and certainly isn't any happier ; he's dead.

As any survey in BusinessWeek will demonstrate, America is a nation of accomplished spenders, slaves to advertising and status symbol hogs. According to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in 2002, the median size of a new home was 20 percent larger than in 1987, even though the size of families has gotten smaller. J.D. Power and Associates, during their marketing research, discovered that in 1980, luxury brands of vehicles (mainly Cadillacs and Lincolns) accounted for only 4.5 percent of new-vehicle sales. By 2003, these luxury brands, in addition to Lexus, Infinity, BMWs and others exceeded 10 percent of sales.

The reason these trends will continue is simple. Americans will always feel the need to outdo the Joneses...or at least keep up with them. This phenomenon is sometimes called conspicuous consumption, or affluenza. As for the Joneses, they keep upping their standards and increasing their spending in an effort to stay ahead of the consumer game.

THE MILLIONAIRES NEXT DOOR

Psychologist Jessie H. O'Neil defines affluenza as the dysfunctional or unhealthy relationship with money, regardless of one's socio-eco-

nomie level. Simply put, Americans want what everyone else has, and when they get that, they want more. Once they have more, everyone else catches up and it's a perpetual game of leap frog.

In an Australian Broadcast Corporation special (Luxury Fever, 2000) Dinesh D'Souza of the American Enterprise Institute discussed the "millionaires next door." Because the media brings the wealthy into our homes via programming like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and more recently MTV's *Cribs* and VH1's *The Fabulous Life Of.*, the average American has a new set of standards for achievements. They are no longer aspiring to be the top executive of their companies, they are trying to keep up with the celebrity Joneses who set the status standards with unfathomable wealth.

"It creates a kind of impatience and restlessness and avarice, and a sense of 'I should be enjoying this too,'" D'Souza says. "They somehow feel they don't have enough, they haven't quite got to the top of the mountain yet. And in some ways, you have to ask 'will they ever get there?' Or is the mountain ever elusive?" London economist James Sproule agrees and has formulated Sproule's Law "It's not enough to keep up with the Joneses, you've got to continuously be one better than the Joneses." The problem is not that people want nice things, but the reason why they want them - envy that others have the possessions that they don't have.

HAPPINESS FOR SALE

"The assumption that money can, should, and does buy happiness, what I call the myth of the American Dream, can exacerbate existing problems," O'Neil says. People spend more to feel better about themselves and acquire mass material goods, but at the same time, they further hurt themselves by plummeting into debt.

"Americans are engaged in an intensifying national shopping spree, rooted in competitive emulation, keeping up with the Joneses on a manic scale," says a Businessweek article. "We are impoverishing ourselves, in pursuit of a consumption goal that is inherently unachievable."

(continued)

The Epidemic of Affluenza *(continued)*

This results in O'Neil's affluenza. Symptoms of the disorder include workaholicism; addictions; preoccupation with externals; low self esteem, self worth and self confidence; and can even result in depression. Furthermore, relationships suffer because more emphasis is placed on working to make more money (to spend more money) rather than on fostering quality time with loved ones. "Self esteem rides on their ability to achieve these external goods. 'If I have the nicest car, I will be envied. People will like me,'" says Potage Path Behavioral Health Clinician Mary Pickton, of people suffering from affluenza. "They end up feeling empty when this doesn't occur."

Tim Kasser, Ph.D from Knox College and Allen Kanner, Ph.D at Berkeley California have shown in their research that when people organize their lives around extrinsic goals such as acquisition of possessions, they report greater unhappiness in relationships, poorer moods and more psychological problems. Kasser distinguishes extrinsic goals, which tend to focus on image, possessions, status and receiving awards, praise and envy from intrinsic goals, that focus on personal growth and community connection.

Kasser further suggests that research shows that when people grow up in unfortunate social situations, they become more materialistic as a way to adapt. "This occurs whether they're not treated very nicely by their parents, or when they experience poverty or even the threat of death," he says.

Acquiring items we *need* provides happiness, while having the items we simply *desire* only leads to temporary satisfaction. Robert Frank, an economist, says "We're not just creatures that compare ourselves to people around the world, we compare ourselves to the people in our local environments." Frank says that the anxiety we feel when we have the shabbiest car in our neighborhood, or are the only one of our friends renting instead of owning a home is perfectly common. This insecurity is what causes us to try and keep up with our "Jones" friends. The satisfaction is only temporary though, because soon one of them will have an even nicer car.

"There's a paradox at the heart of the American economy," he says. "Lower and middle income families are spending more than ever before to feel worthwhile and have some status, but their incomes have stood still or in some cases, declined."

THE TRICKLE DOWN EFFECT

People aren't just hurting themselves by having an overly-materialistic or envious attitude. Affluenza can have assorted effects on the entire family. Joan Wilson, a psychologist at Potage Path says it "teaches kids that externals are what is valued, rather than their own unique personalities, and it

creates competition among family members as well." In addition, if the parents are trying to keep up with the Joneses, they put massive pressure to compete on their offspring. They force the children to achieve at the level the Joneses kids achieve and participate in the same activities. In this case, the children become just one more status symbol for the parents to display.

More detrimental to teaching children a poor sense of values is the impact it can have on family time, says Kathy Cockfield, a team coordinator for Potage Path. "Kids are no longer supervised as their parents are working more and more hours for more money, to consume more things. The kids have plenty of *stuff*, but no quality time."

Fast Facts

- Compared with Americans in 1957, we own twice as many cars per person, eat out twice as often and enjoy endless other commodities that weren't around then - big screen tvs, microwaves, handheld devices - APA online.
- According to Hope College psychologist David G. Myers, compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology.
- In 2000, CEOs of large American companies earned 419 times as much as the average worker, says Robert Frank, an economist. This ratio is up ten times as much from 1980.
- Psychologist Edward Diener, of the University of Illinois at Urbana, has found that it's not the money, but the striving for it, that is linked to happiness.
- More Americans file bankruptcy each year than graduate college, says About.com

IS THERE A CURE IN SIGHT?

There is one way to prevent or correct the Gotta Keep Up mentality. "Don't measure your self esteem by whether or not you have what others have," says Jill Lowery, a clinician at Potage Path. You need to know what is really important to you and why it is important - does a cashmere sweater make you happy because it is soft and you feel you deserve it, or are you happy because you finally have something nicer than the neighbor? "Let *your* values be your rudder and steer you in your own direction," says Sheila Garten, Potage Path clinician. "Don't get steered in someone else's direction." Pickton agrees. "Redefine success by questioning your current value system to break the cycle," she says.

It is also important to develop interests and activities that don't involve purchases. For example, by showcasing your other talents, whether that be music, sports, or writing, you have a chance to boost your self esteem through your achievements, not your net worth or assets.

Judy Uhlar, another clinician at Potage Path suggests volunteering to help the less fortunate. "In this way, you can gain perspective," she says. Once you appreciate what you have you will begin to determine what is frivolous and unnecessary in your life. "There are more important things than having what the neighbors have," she says. It's ok to want nice things for yourself and your family, but not if they come at the expense of what matters most, spending time together.

If you find yourself struggling with envy issues, have an addiction to shopping, or are suffering low self esteem as a result of not having what everyone else has, you may be suffering from affluenza. Please call 330-253-3100 to find out how you can get help.

Or, for more information on Affluenza, visit www.affluenza.com

Can You BUY Happiness?

Researchers claim that we find material goods less fulfilling than most people realize. Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich of the University of Colorado and Cornell University respectively, tested this claim by examining spending on material goods (clothing, jewelry, cds) versus spending on experiences (concert tickets, vacations, etc).

The pair conducted a nation-wide study of 1,279 adults and the results confirmed the claim. 57 percent of respondents, versus 34 percent, found the experiential purchases made them happier, even after accounting for differences in price!

Psychology Today reports that unlike possessions, our experiences get better with time. "We redefine and reconstrue them as we retell them, and they continue to be a part of who we are," says Van Boven.

5 Tips to Stop Shopping!

adapted from www.moneycentral.msn.com

In the midst of the holiday season, it is easy to fall into the spend more trap. For those of you that have a pension for hard-core shopping already, buying gifts becomes a reason to spend and shop more than usual!

If you're worried that you may have a problem with compulsive spending or shopping, psychotherapist April Benson suggests five ways you can start to cope. (If you're deeply in debt or your spending habits are causing conflict with your loved ones, seek professional counsel or consider going to a Debtors Anonymous meeting.)

1. ADMIT SOMETHING'S WRONG. If you can't open any of your closets, your credit cards are maxed out, or you cover up crazy spending behavior, you probably have a problem with shopping. "The first thing you need to do is face up to the issue and admit that you need some kind of intervention," says Benson.

2. EXAMINE THE PROBLEM. Every compulsive spender is different. Do you spend only occasionally but in big splurges? Or are you on a constant spend-a-thon, moving from one credit card to the next? Do you go nuts for a particular commodity -- electronics,

food, jewelry? In order to get a grip, says Benson, "You need to admit the particular nature of your problem."

3. NAME THE FEELINGS. Benson suggests asking: "What are you shopping for?" To boost your ego? Relieve depression? Get back at your spouse? Is it a creative outlet or a form of self-expression? Does being at the mall ease loneliness? Are you shopping out of envy for what others have? Are you trying to keep up with the Joneses?

4. LOOK AT YOUR TIME. Compulsive spenders face more than financial losses, Benson points out. Ask yourself how much time you spend browsing on the Internet or stalking some great deal. How else could you spend your time in ways that would truly improve your quality of life? Could you be spending more time with family and loved ones instead of between clothing racks?

5. OPEN YOUR HORIZONS. Consider volunteering for organizations that can benefit from your shopper savvy, such as Dress for Success, an organization that helps disadvantaged women find jobs by providing them with business-wear for interviews.

Confessions of a Shop-A-Holic

Stephen Danner, a self-proclaimed recovering shop-a-holic turned historian for The Odyssey U.S. Trek website, developed a 12-step recovery program for affluenza after visiting the Mall of America in Minnesota.

- 1) ADMIT YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SHOPPING - that your life has become powerless to consumerism.
- 2) MAKE A DECISION TO CONFRONT THE PROBLEM. Ask yourself if your potential purchase can really make you happier in the long term, or is it for someone with money to burn.
- 3) LEARN THE HISTORY OF CONSUMERISM AND WHY IT HAS SUCH A NASTY REPUTATION. Stephen believes that with the advent of mass production and the use of the assembly line, US businesses started to produce more goods than they could sell. In order to deal with the surplus and make a profit, they had to convince people their products were safe, effective, and NECESSARY.
- 4) COME TO BELIEVE YOU CAN OVERCOME THE PROBLEM. Learn what your impulse buys are and remember, you won't really die if you don't have that Twinkie or Ipod.
- 5) SPEAK WITH OTHER SHOP-A-HOLICS AND HEAR THEIR STORIES.
- 6) MAKE YOURSELF READY TO RENOUNCE NEEDLESS CONSUMPTION.
- 7) HUMBLY SEEK THE GUIDANCE OF A CLOSE FRIEND OR PROFESSIONAL.
- 8) MAKE A LIST OF THE LATEST THINGS YOU HAVE BOUGHT UNNECESSARILY. Look where to cut back.
- 9) TAKE INVENTORY OF USELESS GOODS AND GIVE SOMETHING AWAY.
- 10) CONTINUE to take inventory and give stuff away.
- 11) SEEK THROUGH DIRECT ACTION TO RECLAIM YOUR MENTAL ENVIRONMENT TO COMBAT CONSUMERISM. Simply turn off the tv to avoid advertising.
- 12) SHARE THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN CONSUMERISM TO CARRY THE MESSAGE OF ACTIVISM and keep yourself on track.



Community Pathways is a publication of **Portage Path Behavioral Health**, with outpatient facilities in Akron, Barberton, and Cuyahoga Falls/Stow, and psychiatric emergency services in Akron.

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For more information about the topics covered in this issue, call (330) 376-6144.

To make a referral, call (330) 253-3100.

For 24-hour/7-day **Psychiatric Emergency Services**, call (330) 762-6110.

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Are you suffering from Affluenza?

adapted from Jessie H. O'Neil, psychotherapist

Affluenza is a dysfunctional relationship with money/wealth, or the pursuit of it. Below are some cues that you might be suffering from affluenza.

- loss of personal & professional productivity
- loss of future motivation
- inability to delay gratification or tolerate frustration
- false sense of entitlement
- low self esteem
- low self worth
- loss of self confidence
- preoccupation with externals
- depression
- self absorption
- high regard for outer self, low regard for inner self
- workaholism
- addictions

If you are experiencing some of these symptoms and you feel the need to “keep up with the Joneses”, you may be suffering from affluenza. For more information, call 330-253-3100.