

## mindovermatter

by Professor Gordon Parker

# A compulsion to shop

Compulsive buying disorder is a diagnosis that pathologises the 'shop till you drop' philosophy of many.

## INTRODUCTION

COMPULSIVE buying is common. It may reflect personality style, defence mechanisms (e.g. self-consolation), a disorder, or be a symptom of several more categorical psychiatric conditions.

## HISTORY

Vicki, an accountant in her mid-30s, presented in distress, detailing a significant number of psychotic preoccupations. She was convinced that people were talking about her, and she described episodes dominated by such convictions going back into mid-adolescence.

At interview she was preoccupied, somewhat agitated, and failed to interact with the interviewer. On questioning, she admitted to a number of significant depressive features indicative of a biological depression (inability to get out of bed, physical slowing, poor concentration and pathological guilt).

While psychotic depression is rare in an individual younger than 40 unless they have a bipolar disorder, systematic review of manic/hypomanic features identified few such symptoms, with those insufficient to suggest a bipolar disorder. The differential diagnosis was either psychotic depression or schizophrenia.

Treatment with an antidepressant and an antipsychotic brought a slow improvement. Her mood became reactive and the depression lifted considerably, although there were ongoing delusional preoccupations about people at work.

Surprisingly, at review six months later – and when taking lower doses of both her antidepressant and antipsy-

chotic – Vicki came in dressed as if she was off to ladies' day at the races. Her hat, satin dress and leather shoes were all expensive and colourful. The diagnosis appeared clarified – bipolar disorder – her manic features having been underestimated at her initial presentation.

At interview no comment was made on her appearance. To have questioned it risked impertinence. Near the end of the review however, she started talking about her financial difficulties, and her longstanding habit – irrespective of mood – of compulsive buying.

*“I felt good briefly – like an actress... able to wear extravagant clothes”*

One thing could lead to another. For example, she bought a computer so that she could type her own résumé. Her computer access led her to Internet auctions where she bought memorabilia, incurring crippling debt for Vicki and her family to pay off.

“I couldn't believe what I had done. I bought so many fancy outfits. I felt good briefly – like an actress in the theatre able to wear extravagant flamboyant clothes.”

## COMPULSIVE BUYING DISORDER

The Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler was one of the first to describe compulsive buying disorder (CBD) or 'oniomania'. It was positioned as an impulsive disorder, akin to kleptomania and pyromania. Its estimated prevalence in the community ranges from two to eight per cent, with a strong female preponderance.

In the 1990s, a number of clinical case series were reported and, subsequently, debate has continued about how it might be classified. It has been viewed as a manifestation of obsessive compulsive

disorder, as an addiction problem akin to alcohol and drug use disorders, and as a symptom without any necessary disorder status.

As detailed in a recent review by Black<sup>1</sup>, individuals with CBD are preoccupied with shopping and spending, with many hours each week so engaged. Many describe an increasing level of anxiety before shopping relieved only when a purchase is made.

There is an anticipatory phase where the individual becomes preoccupied with either buying a specific item or considering how and where to shop, then a preparation

phase followed by an exciting shopping experience, and, once goods have been purchased, a feeling of disappointment.

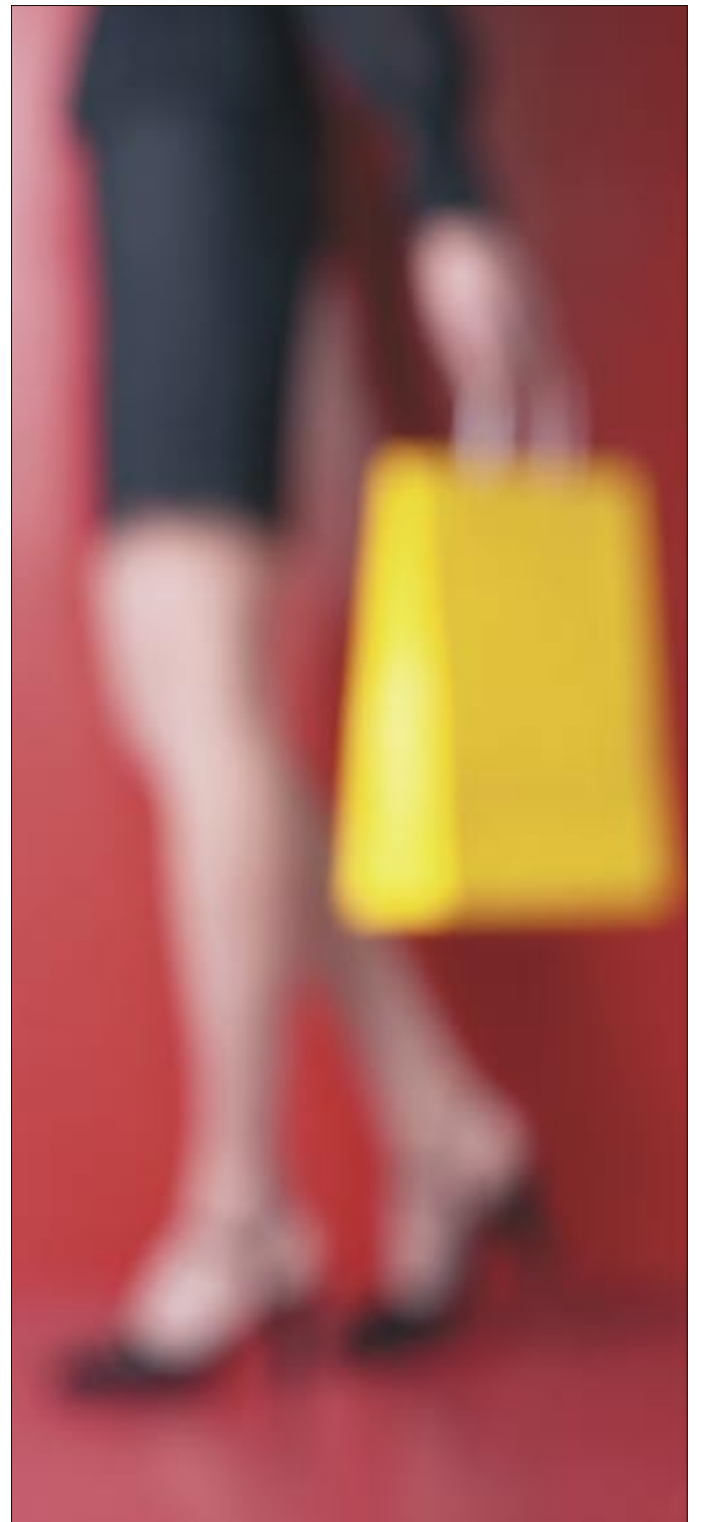
Compulsive shopping tends to be a private activity and most individuals shop alone. The most common items sought are clothing, jewellery, make-up and collectibles (such as CDs).

For those with bipolar disorder, such behaviour is likely to be episodic and associated with a manic episode. CBD, on the other hand, tends to be persistent, but increases following periods of negative mood states (such as stress, anxiety, boredom and anger).

Its profile – in terms of preceding mood state, phasic components, female preponderance – is akin to other self-consolatory strategies such as comfort eating.

## DIAGNOSIS

Vicki had been a compulsive shopper for most of her life. However, when she experienced a manic episode, her shopping sprees would increase dramatically and without any level of financial restraint. For her, it was a general coping



repertoire activated preferentially in a manic state.

At this point, a mood stabiliser was added to her medication, and it was suggested she negotiate a contract with her parents that would control her access to credit cards – particularly when they observed her developing the disrupted sleep patterns and other early warning signs of an elevated mood. ☺

## Reference

1. Black DW. Compulsive buying disorder: a review of the evidence. *CNS Spectr* 2007;12(2):124-32.

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