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Buyers Beware: All That Stuff Must Be Stashed

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Admitting you have a problem can be the first step to overcoming addiction. Two years ago, I admitted I was a shopaholic and began my self-diagnosed therapy, which includes limiting Banana Republic visits to bimonthly rather than biweekly, organizing my current shoe inventory to avoid buying duplicates, and streamlining home electronics to one television and one iPod.

Alas, a recent trip to Italy indicated that this addiction is one leather market away from a relapse. My husband and I agreed that our honeymoon would include viewing some of Italy's great masterpieces. We merely disagreed about what constituted a masterpiece. His: Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." Mine: handmade pink loafers.

Addiction, it seems, had only taken a vacation.

Fortunately, as a shopaholic struggling to reform, I have a knack for making the most of my space and keeping chaos at bay, so family and friends -- some truly accomplished shoppers among them -- began asking for help in organizing their excess, usually in tiny apartments with even tinier closets.

I urged them to tuck off-season clothes out of view in sweater bags on high closet shelves; to stash shoes in clear boxes under the bed and out of sight. I scanned the market for storage solutions and space stretchers, such as a device called a "doubler" that adds a rod to a bulging closet, instantly doubling the hanging space. I suggested that one friend store her frequently used yoga mats, towels and clothing in a childhood toy chest -- that provides additional seating in her studio apartment.

Last year, I took the plunge and turned my hobby into a business called Order. I visit homes and offices to help clients purge, reorganize and find places to put things away. This line of work has shown me that there are plenty of people who can't stop shopping long enough to think about storage, and that they tend to come in several basic types:

Impulsives. This is the most generic type and no doubt includes almost everyone at one time or another. We all fall victim to purchasing something on a whim occasionally, even if we don't need it: books, CDs, flip-flops, dishtowels on sale -- even though our shelves and closets can't hold one more thing.

Hoarders. These are people who buy things for the future: paper towels and Q-tips, or corn-cob holders and soap dishes. One client called it stocking up; she

once went to buy a lampshade and came home with several. "If I find something I like, I always buy doubles," she told me. "I have gone back to stores multiple times to buy out their entire stock of an item. . . . Sometimes, I buy multiple items in different colors with the intention of returning items that don't work well together."

On one trip to a local discount store she bought 100 wine glasses for some future (unplanned) party, figuring the price was too good to pass up. Those glasses are still in storage. These days she has a new obsession: storage units. Currently, she rents 10 spaces at an average cost of \$80 per month. Figure that's \$960 for one unit for one year. Multiply by 10 units. We can all do the math.

Cryer Buyers. These people shop with their emotions, to make themselves feel better, to console themselves for a bad breakup or lousy day, or to congratulate themselves for a good one.

"I shop usually out of emotion, as a reward for going through something difficult. When my cat died, I bought an expensive Prada jacket."

Stalkers. These shoppers waste not only money but time, researching, obsessing and pondering their purchases. They often visit the items several times before purchasing. They comparison shop, and poll friends for opinions and support. One client's current prey is a bicycle, which he has been circling for two months.

Upgraders. These people want only the best, newest, latest and coolest, even if what they already own is perfectly functional. One client, typical of the breed, spends weekends consumed by finding just the right coffee table or the perfect lamp. The Internet offers limitless possibilities to find exactly what he "thinks" he wants. This strain of retail addiction brings him back to stores constantly, either buying or returning, and while he's there returning something, he is buying something else.

Tech nuts. A subset of the upgrader, this group is compelled to keep up with the latest advances in electronic devices large and small. One client's early passion for music made him the first kid on the block to own a hi-fi stereo. Today, his prey is HDTV and the latest Sony Vaio computer: "Every two years I get a new computer or a new television." Tech innovations guarantee he will remain in hot pursuit. He is also after the ultimate in home brew. "I love coffee so much that I am constantly trying to find the perfect cup." He currently owns four designer coffee makers. "As a result, my family and friends are often the recipients of rarely used coffee makers and pod pots." When I caught up with him he was enamored with the Braun Impressions model-- "without a doubt one of the best coffeemakers I have ever used." He hesitates. "This one might be the keeper."

Whatever the profile, one trait is consistent: They buy more than they have space for. Here are some solutions I offer to modify their addictions.

Take inventory. Store owners get rid of what's stale and give best-sellers prominence. Do the same in your home by culling out items that are not being used or appreciated and rotating favorites to keep your home looking fresh.

Weed out. If you've bought things and never used them, see if they can be returned to the store. For older items, plan for donation, consignment shops or a garage sale.

Become a bookkeeper. Track your spending with a shopping journal. Record not only how much money but how much time you spend in stores or shopping online. It can be an eye-opener.

Reorder only when necessary. Adopt the retail practice of ordering when an item is about to run out, instead of stockpiling for a rainy day.

Step back. Take a hiatus from shopping for a few days, a week or even a month. Replace emotion with reason. Walk out of the store if need be, and go back only if you can't live without it.