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## Compulsive shopping: a disorder?

By Dr. Douglas Berger, M.D., Ph D. | [ASK THE EXPERT](#)



**QUESTION:** My wife and I have been married for 15 years. We have been blessed with a good life but my wife is a shopaholic. This has been the subject of our frequent debates because she won't see things logically. What do I do? -William

This will be a knotty problem to fix because the wife refuses to see things logically, indicating she has poor insight. The first thing is to find out what the underlying problem is. The frequency of shopping, the items shopped, the amount spent, the speed of and timing of the onset of the shopping etc., are key data points to collect.

The shopping could be due to trouble with self esteem, attempting to fill a gap in self esteem by purchasing items. The shopping problem would likely be long-standing and in this case the person usually would have insight that their behavior is irrational. Someone with depression may also over shop to alleviate depression, and they would also likely have insight into the problem.

The shopping may be due to an impulse control disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). In OCD the person would have good insight, but also likely have many other symptoms of obsessions (worry and doubts) and/or compulsions (counting, checking, etc.). In an impulse control disorder there would likely be good insight, however there might not be other clear symptoms.

Lack of insight in impulsive shopping might most likely be due to manic behavior, indicated by symptoms such as hyperactivity, rapid speech, needing less sleep, etc. In rare cases, if the person is middle or older age, a stroke or Alzheimer's disease can sometimes suddenly cause impulsive behaviors that are out of character to the person's standard way of functioning.

If the wife is reacting to a difficult or controlling husband, having the husband contain his controlling behavior might alleviate her shopping. If it is really the husband who is over-frugal and tight with money and the wife's spending is reasonable, then counseling intervention with the husband or couple seems indicated. While removing credit card or limiting cash availability to the

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wife might contain the spending, it could result in other reactions on the part of the wife. Psychotherapy and/or medical intervention depending on the underlying cause of the shopping would seem to be indicated as the combination of spending a lot of money and irrationality is often a recipe for divorce.

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*Dr. Berger and his staff at the Meguro Counseling Center in the Shibuya-Ebisu area provide mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese.*

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