

Shrink Rap: Shopping for a 'Real Steal'

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Between psychotherapy hours, I drove to the Neiman Marcus, Fashion Island, parking lot en route to Starbucks. As I was walking past Neiman's, a tall well-dressed woman crossed my path. Dressed in black, she was wearing a mink jacket and stiletto heels. She had just exited the store. Nobody else was around.

She made it no more than 30 yards before a female security guard dashed out and confronted her. "I'm sorry but you stole lingerie from the store. I need to take your purse. Please come with me." The woman let out an embarrassed yelp, handing over her purse without argument. The guard then took her by the arm. A second guard trotted up to assist, taking the woman's other arm. Together, they ushered her around to the back of the store. What came next was most likely an arrest, possibly followed by an ugly evening in jail - not to mention the humiliating legal and social repercussions to follow.

"Shrinkage" is not what happens during therapy sessions (or after a dip in a cold swimming pool, for that matter); it's the retail industry's euphemism for shoplifting and it costs stores over \$25 million a day and \$10 billion annually. Adults comprise 75% of shoplifters, and the vast majority do it not out of need or greed, but in response to social and personal stress in their lives. And get this: even after arrest, 69% of them will do it again.

The types of shoplifters include professionals, who steal for profit; the impoverished, who steal out of need; thrill seekers (usually teenagers); drug addicts; and kleptomaniacs, who are impulsive and careless. But by far the greatest number - roughly 75% - are labeled addictive-compulsive shoplifters. Emotionally, this group has repressed anger and often exhibits signs of other compulsive addictions, such as overeating, shopping, drug use, or gambling. Typically, they will steal items that are inexpensive, and then give them to others as gifts. If caught, they will show guilt, shame, or remorse. Often, they will break down and cry when caught and confronted.

In addition to anger, emotional motivators of shoplifting include: grief (filling the void due to a loss); depression (distracting from sadness, getting a lift); anxiety (calming fears, comforting); acceptance/competition (fitting in); power and control (counteracting feeling lost or powerless); boredom/excitement (living on the edge); and entitlement/reward (compensating oneself for over-giving).

Most of us like getting something for nothing, like complimentary admission to a show or a free meal. We consider ourselves savvy shoppers when we find a "real steal." But we stop short of violating the law and our conscience by shoplifting. Shoplifters rationalize that stores can afford the losses and think they won't get caught. Some report feeling a "high" when they get away with it - a surge of adrenaline that temporarily relieves any underlying emotional problems that may have prompted them to steal. Because of the "rush," shoplifting may become a habit that's hard to break.

Clinicians have observed there is almost always a recent triggering event leading to the incident and, curiously, about 30% have some connection to coping with a diagnosis of cancer - either in the shoplifters themselves or someone close to them.

Because shoplifters think they won't get caught, they don't understand what it can mean to their lives if they do. They may be arrested and led through the store in handcuffs, made to pay damages, face charges of theft, and banned from stores or malls.

The guilt and shame attached to shoplifting make it tough to talk about with anyone. This means most offenders won't seek professional help unless mandated by the court - after they've been arrested. But if you find yourself with persistent thoughts or impulses to shoplift or are already involved in it, reach out and get help before it's too late.