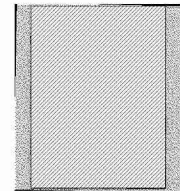


SHAPE

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“Harmless” ADDICTIONS?

Shopping, tanning, and even exercise have the potential to become as addictive as drugs and alcohol—and just as destructive. Meet three women who took their habits to the extreme, and learn how they came back stronger than ever.

BY *Stephanie Booth* • PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Claire Benoist*

WOULD YOU DO SIT-UPS IN BED at night for fear that the workout you did that morning wasn't enough? Or head to a tanning salon after a day at the beach because your bronzed skin still seemed too pale? It might sound unusual, but activities like exercising, catching a few rays, or even shopping are capable of morphing into compulsions that can ruin lives.



imilar to how alcohol and drug abusers crave the euphoric feeling they get from their substance of choice, a growing number of people experience a rush from doing a specific activity. With the exception of gambling, there isn't a lot of research about so-called behavioral addictions. But what data does exist is alarming: For instance, a recent survey of more than 2,500 adults found that nearly 6 percent were compulsive buyers. Other data, from Fielding Graduate University, indicates that 3 percent of the general population is likely to be addicted to exercise. And a study from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center revealed that as many as 70 percent of sun worshippers exhibit withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, if they miss their regular fix of UV light. "For the brain, pleasure is pleasure, whether it comes from a substance, a big win at blackjack, or any enjoyable activity," says psychiatrist David Sack, M.D., CEO of Elements Behavioral Health, a network of addiction treatment programs.

Like drugs, some behaviors cause a powerful surge in dopamine, one of the brain's "feel-good" chemicals. Over time, though, the brain adapts and begins to crave more of this neurotransmitter in an effort to re-create the initial euphoria. Genes, family upbringing, and underlying mental health issues all increase a person's risk of getting hooked. So too does gender: While men are more susceptible to substance abuse, women are more apt to become addicted to a behavior, says Sack.

Precisely why they're more prone to this problem isn't yet understood, but women are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety, and it's possible that behavioral addictions impact similar pathways in the brain. One thing that's painfully clear is that these addictions can destroy careers, drain bank accounts, threaten relationships, and wreak havoc on the body. To complicate matters further, many addicts keep their problem a secret, though friends and family usually catch on eventually. Despite these obstacles, recovery is possible—as the following women can attest.

"I Was a Shopaholic"

ERIKA ILANAN, 25, SAN JOSE, CA

"We can't afford it" was a common refrain when Erika was a kid. "I was raised by a single mother who considered going out to lunch a splurge," she says. Life became more comfortable when Erika was 9 and her mother remarried, but they still stuck to a budget. So when Erika went off to college in 2007, she couldn't wait to apply for a credit card. "Having it made me feel rich," she says. "For the first time ever, I could purchase anything I wanted."

At first, Erika spent around \$50 on eBay each week, buying items like belts and cell phone cases. But, after becoming a devotee of fashion blogs, she developed an obsession with high-end designers like Chanel and Balenciaga. "I spent hours shopping online, especially when I was bored or stressed," she says. "Finding a limited-edition item was the ultimate thrill."

Studies show that shopping lights up the same pleasure centers in the brain as drugs like heroin. For Erika, it led to overwhelming urges to spend. Before long, she was charging as much as \$2,000 a month. "I had a gnawing feeling that I had a problem, but I ignored it," she says. "I was working part-time and always managed to pay my bills on time." When friends and family gently suggested her shopping was out of control, Erika brushed them off. "I justified every purchase by telling myself I deserved it."

In 2010, shortly after graduating and starting her first full-time job, she dropped five grand on four handbags.

HER MOMENT OF TRUTH When Erika finally maxed out her card at \$20,000, alarm bells went off. Then, while visiting an online forum for purse lovers, she stumbled upon a thread where users chatted about finances. "Everyone else had thousands to their names, while I had nothing," says Erika. "I knew I had to make a change."

HOW SHE KICKED THE HABIT For several months Erika declared a moratorium on shopping. She used mint.com to create a budget, set goals, and record every purchase—no matter how small. Meanwhile, she got a crash course in money management by reading financial websites like learnvest.com. Erika also started a blog: fromshoppingtosaving.com. "Whenever I was tempted to buy something, I would write about it instead," she says. "That was my form of therapy."

Erika ended up selling many of her purchases, and watching her debt slowly shrink helped her stay disciplined. When she felt the urge to hit "check out" on her computer, she distracted herself by taking a walk. Carrying a notebook also helped;

if she was tempted by something at the mall, she'd write down what it was and a description. "After a couple of days, I'd reread my notes," she says. "Usually I didn't want it anymore."

Now a full-time law student, Erika has paid off most of her debt. She hopes to keep her student loans to a minimum, and in the future plans to save up enough money to eventually buy her own home. On the rare occasions she does go shopping, Erika asks herself, "Do I really need it?" If the answer is no, she passes. "It isn't always easy," she says. "But exercising willpower makes me feel like I'm in control of my life again."

"I Couldn't Stop Exercising"

ALEXA*, 32, POMPANO, FL

Growing up, Alexa developed earlier than other girls, and by fourth grade she was being teased by classmates about her womanly breasts and hips. Though not overweight, Alexa ate so many salads to help control her changing body that her family nicknamed her "Rabbit" and urged her to eat the Latino specialties that they enjoyed. So she found other ways to keep her curves in check, including doing push-ups and sit-ups in her bedroom daily and running after every meal.

Before long she was also taking step and dance classes several times a week and often avoiding friends unless they were doing something that involved torching calories, like participating in a charity run or joining her at the gym. "Exercise gave me a high," she says. "Looking

WARNING SIGNS

IF THREE OR MORE OF THESE RESONATE, CONSIDER GETTING HELP.

- You've had this compulsion for at least a year.
- When a craving strikes, you're unable to ignore it.
- Your habit interferes with important activities, or you find yourself sneaking off to do it at inappropriate times.
- The dependency has caused you personal, professional, financial, or legal distress.
- Over time you've had to ramp up the frequency of your behavior to feel satisfaction.
- Friends or family have pointed out that you may have a problem.

Source: Gerald Marti, M.D., president of the Maryland Society of Addiction Medicine



NOT GYM DANDY
If your whole life
is in your locker,
it's time to
take a break.

back, it was almost like having an orgasm. There was such a release of anxiety and stress." But there were also serious downsides: By age 16, Alexa's periods had stopped. She no longer filled out her 32A bras, and her size 0 pants wouldn't stay up. Her family repeatedly told her she looked too thin, but, she says, "I thought looking gaunt was attractive." (Focusing on exactly how much she weighed then and now could trigger a return of Alexa's symptoms, so we agreed not to publish the numbers.)

Her obsession with exercise escalated when she got to college. When not studying or waiting tables, she participated in boot camp, dance, and martial arts classes, in addition to running and working out at the gym. At night, she sacrificed sleep so she could complete Tae Bo videos. To stay fueled, Alexa relied mostly on water and Gatorade.

"I ate just enough so I wouldn't pass out," she says. (It's not unusual for exercise addicts to also suffer from eating disorders and vice versa; studies show as many as 48 percent of women with anorexia or bulimia get hooked on hitting the gym as well.) For at least 10 years, "I didn't miss a day of exercise," Alexa admits. "I panicked that if I did, I'd look completely different the next morning and be disgusted with myself."

STYLING: SARAH GUIDO/HALLEY RESOURCES INC.

*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

5 STEPS TO RECOVERY

1. Fess up—to yourself and others. "Shame fuels addiction," says Shahla Modir, M.D., of the Avalon Malibu and SOBA Recovery Centers in Malibu, CA. "Recognizing the problem is the first step."
2. Ask for assistance. Reach out to a family member, friend, health care provider, or self-help line.
3. Get real. Writing down the damage your addiction has done to you and your loved ones will remind you to abstain, says Modir.
4. Nip stress in the bud. Meditation can help you stay strong when the urge to relapse strikes.
5. See an expert. "Many behavioral addictions overlap with mental health disorders like depression and anxiety," says Modir, so get screened.

HER MOMENT OF TRUTH On her 30th birthday, Alexa's boyfriend, Jason*, confronted her. For a while he had hinted that he was concerned, but now he issued an ultimatum: Seek treatment or he'd end their relationship. "That terrified me," she says.

HOW SHE KICKED THE HABIT With Jason's support, Alexa began eight weeks of intensive outpatient therapy at the [Renfrew Center](#) in Coconut Creek, FL. A doctor there laid out the potential dangers Alexa faced if she didn't change her ways, including heart, liver, and kidney failure. "That scared me," says Alexa. "But what helped most was learning that it wasn't too late to avoid this fate."

Therapy and journaling helped Alexa understand why she'd become so dependent

on exercise. "I wanted to be thin so I could fit in and be physically strong because I didn't feel that way on the inside." The most crucial part of Alexa's treatment was figuring out how to moderate her activity. After going cold turkey for two months, she began occasionally attending yoga classes, where the emphasis was on relieving stress rather than burning calories.

Today, she views exercise as a way to be healthy rather than a means to stay slim. Since gyms could prompt a relapse, she avoids them. Instead, she sticks with yoga or walks on the beach with Jason. Of course, slowing down and eating better have caused Alexa to gain some pounds. Now at a healthy weight, she loves her new curves—and her 32C bras. Says Alexa, "It's nice to put on clothes and look like a sexy woman, not an 11-year-old boy."

"I Was Obsessed With Tanning"

JENNIFER MOECKEL, 30, SAN DIEGO

As a native of Southern California, Jennifer was accustomed to spending lots of time in the sun. She began swimming competitively at 6 years old and practiced in an outdoor pool for hours each day. As she got older and continued to compete on both the swim and water polo teams, her UV exposure increased. "I was always happier when it was sunny," she says.

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"And since I have olive skin and tan easily, it was easy to forget to apply sunscreen."

Jennifer first visited a tanning salon at 16, when she wanted to minimize tan lines before wearing a strapless dress to a dance. She soon started heading to the salon before special occasions. "I thought a tan made me feel prettier and thinner," she says. The self-esteem boost wasn't imaginary: Research shows that UV light prompts the body to release endorphins, brain chemicals linked to feelings of pleasure.

As Jennifer got darker, her parents and swim coach warned that her habit could be deadly, but she wasn't dissuaded. "I figured if I ever got skin cancer, it would hit when I was older and I'd just have it cut off," she says.

After high school, she enrolled at the University of California Santa Barbara. In the spring and summer, Jennifer logged long shifts as a beach lifeguard and practiced with the swim team. She also tanned indoors several times each week. "On days I didn't get sun, I felt pasty and self-conscious," she says.

HER MOMENT OF TRUTH In 2009, when Jennifer was 26, she noticed a lump on her foot that looked like a bug bite. A month later she finally went to a dermatologist who told her it was nothing to worry about. It took several doctors to get the correct diagnosis: stage 3 melanoma. When Jennifer found out that meant she had only a 60 percent chance of surviving the next five years, she was shocked. "I was so angry with myself that I might not live to see 30." She ended up undergoing two years of surgeries, chemo, and radiation.

HOW SHE KICKED THE HABIT After her diagnosis, Jennifer vowed never to tan again. She still loves being outdoors, but "now I always wear a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a minimum of SPF 45. And hats are my new best friend." (Surprisingly, 27 percent of melanoma survivors don't wear sunscreen, according to a new Yale study.) She's also come to understand that too much tanning has cosmetic downsides as well. "Looking back at pictures of myself, I realized I didn't look pretty," says Jennifer, who volunteers for the Melanoma Research Foundation. "I just looked unnatural." And, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation, it's the number-one cause of premature aging.

Four years have passed since Jennifer's diagnosis, and she continues to be disease-free. But because recurrence is always a possibility—and former melanoma patients have a greater risk of developing other types of cancer—she has PET and CT scans every eight months. Admittedly, she also still indulges in a spray tan before big events like going on vacation or attending a wedding. "I still think tan skin is attractive to an extent," says Jennifer. "But I'm not willing to risk my health again to get it."

WHERE TO GET HELP

Because researchers are still in the early stages of understanding behavioral addiction, there's no dedicated tanning addiction hotline, for example. But here's where to go for assistance with the disorders mentioned in this story.

- **Compulsive buying:** Debtors Anonymous (debtorsanonymous.org or 800-421-2383)
- **Exercise dependence:** National Eating Disorders Association (nationaleatingdisorders.org or 800-931-2237)
- **Tanning addiction:** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (findtreatment.samhsa.gov or 800-662-HELP)