

Shopping The Blues Away

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Text:

We are gods. Gods of a society based on well-being. Everything revolves around us in this modern, shiny Olympus of beauty, physical appearance, and happiness. We wander around this paradise sure of our ability to move the pawns of an extremely satisfying game. And why should it be different? We have everything, and what is not in our hands now will soon be. It takes nothing! But here it comes. The thunder, the earthquake, the jolt. The love of our life cheated on us with our best friend. Then, we get a C on the chemistry exam we had studied so much for, and our best friend, who is now with our ex-boyfriend, decided that she doesn't need us anymore. Oh my God, how could all that have happened? All in one day? It can't be. Our omnipotent might is now weak, the seed of doubt is growing in our subconscious ... we need certainty. What is going to give us full satisfaction? Shopping. The appeal of a boutique whose doors open as we walk in ... divine. The cute shop assistant fulfills every single wish we have ... divine. To swipe our credit card ... divine. Here you go: an amazing life to our divine look, and we return (at least for a while) to be the Zeus, Hera, or Venus we were before with a room full of useless items and a lighter bank account - but with a happy heart. Shopping has had its effect on an apparently incurable depression. Depression, severe dejection felt especially by women over a period of time, is accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy. Throughout history, doctors have tried to find a cure for this illness. Some recommended a nice trip to the most relaxing hotel on an Italian beach. Others suggested yoga. But someone else came out with the easiest solution: shopping. How many girls have felt that a day of shopping after a tremendous fight with their boyfriend helped? Quite a few. Visiting 50 clothes shops, trying on a bunch of different items, and swiping your credit card gives a sense of relief known as "retail therapy." Retail therapy is shopping with the primary purpose of improving the buyer's mood or disposition. Victor Marchetto, A&S '10, says, "The act of buying is the focus and not the product. Retail therapy is when people consume because the mere act of acquiring new things is pleasurable." It is normally a short-lived habit. Items purchased during periods of retail therapy are sometimes referred to as "comfort buys." The term "retail therapy" was first coined in the 1980s in an article for the Chicago Tribune: "We've become a nation measuring out our lives in shopping bags and nursing our psychic ills through retail therapy." But the question is: Does this activity help depressed people reach a stable state of relief, or is it just a way to cause more pain? If in the beginning this therapy helped depressed individuals heal their sadness, in the end it hurt them more. In fact, depressed buyers end up buying unnecessary goods that destroy their bank accounts. In 2001, the European Union conducted a study and found out that 33 percent of shoppers surveyed had a "high level of addiction to rash or unnecessary consumption." Because shopping gives people fleeting relief, they keep on spending, becoming slaves to shopping. A study conducted by Melbourne University categorizes this

need for shopping as a mental disorder called "oniomania," or compulsive shopping disorder. This disorder leads the depressed person to buy items one doesn't need and cannot afford. Eventually, the buyer regrets what was bought and depression returns. "Retail therapy is detrimental to people with depression," says Katie Casey, A&S '10. "Retail therapy is the belief that buying things will solve problems, but it doesn't actually solve deeper emotional dissatisfaction. Then, when the new purchase fails to solve the problem it was intended to fix, one is left even more depressed." Depression also arises when we do not think we fit into society. In a materialistic society, appearance is the most important thing, and people often become slaves of trends and branding in order to keep up with the high standards that our society demands. "Branding in our consumer society occurs when advertisers make an association between their brand and cultural values," Marchetto says. "Such as the idea that buying a Coke can help contribute to racial unity, or that consuming certain products can make your life better." Consumption and consumerism are aspects of society that push people to believe they create personal fulfillment. "A dress isn't just a dress, it's the way to solve loneliness when it attracts a boyfriend. There are people who believe self-esteem and confidence, friendship and love, intelligence and success can be bought with cash or credit," Casey says. Taking out these fresh, shiny, green rectangular sheets of paper with a somewhat happy face on top and exchanging them for a shiny piece of clothing seems to make one feel better. But, is this really going to relieve that unhappiness deep down inside? "Some people buy things when they feel unhappy because they have hope that something new will solve their problems. To generalize, when people need a change in their lives, they look to things that can be purchased to bring about a transformation rather than finding the root of unhappiness and cultivating the internal strengths necessarily to solve it. Buying new shoes is certainly easier than soul-searching," Casey says. Upon buying goods, shoppers look for inspiration for their emotions, an emotion they can't find in their lives. They look for happiness in material things. "This philosophy that you can buy happiness transforms material goods into means in which to feel better. The goods themselves do not matter, they are only means for which we can continue the act of consumption," Marchetto says. How does this retail therapy affect people? At first, buying things will alleviate problems, but in the long run, a greater hurt develops. Feelings would be the same as those before a "shop till you drop" trip. "Retail therapy doesn't actually solve deeper emotional dissatisfaction. When the new purchase fails to solve the problem it was intended to fix, one is left even more depressed," Marchetto says.