Shopping addiction possible

Joy Black used to shop so frequently at Talbot's Outlet that she knew the sales staff by name. For her, the thrill of shopping was in the sheer delight of finding a great bargain.

"I liked getting 75 percent off," said Mrs. Black, 47. "Even if I didn't need it, I'd have to buy it."

When the St. Francis Xavier parishioner's third child entered school, she found freedom. "I'd go shopping for no reason at all. I kind of went wild. It lasted a few years."

Yet when the shelves and rods in her closet were crammed and the volume of clothing overwhelmed her, she questioned her shopping habit.

"I mean, how many white turtlenecks do you need?" she asked as she laughed. "I can't tell you how much I got rid of with the tags still on. I started to see the ridiculousness of it. Even though the items were cheap, it got to be wasteful."

That was five years ago.

"I'm off that now," said the substitute teacher at McDonogh School, Owings Mills, where her children attend. "When we built a new house, I ran out of time and money. Now I shop for the need; before it was out of boredom."

Although shopping can be a real addiction for some, reports Dr. Anne Stoline, psychiatrist at Perry Point VA Medical Center and formerly at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Mrs. Black felt shopping was not that way in her $300-$500 a month spending routine.

"I'm not one of these people you see on TV that it is really a problem and they can't help themselves," she said. "I wouldn't put myself in that category."

People who fall into that category, said Dr. Stoline, have an inability to control the shopping and spending impulses. The consequences impair their life enough to make an impact in some area, financially or socially.

There are signs of a shopping addiction.
“I think if a person is distressed by it or if they try to cut down without the ability to do so,” said the psychiatrist. “If they feel that when they can’t go shopping, they become anxious, depressed or upset in some way. Also, how much they think about it during the day and how much of their free time is occupied with it.”

Addictive shoppers have an emotional need not met elsewhere in their life, according to Dr. Stoline. One solution for someone to stop the addiction – sometimes labeled as an obsessive/compulsive disorder – is to seek professional help and take medication.
If someone is not a shopping addict but wishes to decrease the time and money spent shopping, the doctor suggests using common sense thinking – set a budget and time limits.

Although self-proclaimed “cured” shopper Mrs. Black still has friends who check the heels of her shoes in her closet to see if she has worn them, she said now she shops less and only by need. “I did it because I could. After we built the house there wasn’t that extra $500 laying around. I need to be more financially careful now.”

Still, she admits she will always enjoy shopping. “I’m always happy to go out and get a new pair of shoes!”