



\$PENT

Like many, **Debbie Roes** used retail therapy to cheer herself up and calm herself down. Until that coping mechanism became a compulsion and cost her deeply.

AS TOLD TO **STEPHANIE BOOTH** PHOTOGRAPH BY **TONI GREAVES**



THE MOVIE *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is a lighthearted comedy. But when I watched it at home in 2010, Rebecca, the main character, struck me as simply...tragic. She became rapturously happy when she hit a sample sale, lied to those she loved about the plastic she'd maxed out, and valued Pucci boots above, well, everything. About halfway through the movie, I began crying. You see, I, too, was a compulsive shopper.

By that point, when I was 43, my addiction to *things* had wreaked havoc on my life. Over the previous two decades, I'd spent tons of money on clothes and shoes—as much as \$200,000 total. I could barely open my closet without getting overwhelmed by the nearly 500 items inside it. Think mountains of dresses, blouses, suits, coats, belts, and purses. And just like someone with a drug or alcohol dependency, I'd fictionalized parts of my life in order to hide my habit. People around me routinely joked about indulging in “retail therapy.” I'd laugh as well. But, really, it wasn't funny.

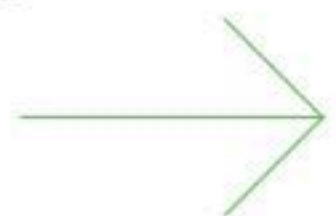
BORN TO SHOP?

When I was growing up, money was tight. Although my father was an engineer and my mother was a nurse, the cost of living in our affluent San Francisco suburb was high. Our financial challenges only grew after my parents split, when I was 14, and life got harder in other ways as well. My dad moved across the country and then abroad, leaving me and my younger brother with my mom. Now and then, I'd receive a tchotchke from his travels. But I rarely saw him.

I'd always been shy and prone to depression. But once adolescence hit, my self-esteem plummeted. I worried about my weight, certain that my friends were thinner and prettier. Plus, I hated that I couldn't shell out for designer wardrobes like theirs. My mother couldn't understand; she didn't care about clothes. To me, though, they had come to symbolize acceptance.

Whenever I earned enough money from babysitting to go to the mall and buy a T-shirt or a wraparound skirt, I'd lie awake in bed the night before, my heart racing with anticipation, like a small child on Christmas Eve. Sometimes I was too excited to sleep. Shopping filled me with the hope that I could find some item that would transform me into a more confident, popular person.

It's perhaps no surprise that, by my teens, I had developed an eating disorder. I began restricting my food and obsessively exercising. Occa-



sionally, after starving myself for days, I'd binge on ice cream and cookies.

I was hospitalized six times for my eating disorder. Whenever I found the opportunity, I snuck out of the inpatient facility and walked to the shopping mall across the road. I basked in the setting. The gleaming towers of merchandise and the racks of new dresses soothed me. There, I could escape my real-life problems, if only temporarily.

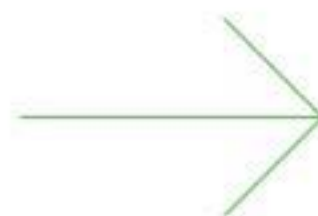
Over the next few years, I was in and out of eating-disorder treatment. Later I had to juggle my recovery and my class load at San Francisco State University, where I studied clinical psychology. Only at age 21, thanks to loads of therapy and antidepressants, did I finally accept that, unless I changed my habits, my disorder would kill me. Unfortunately, when I became less obsessed with food and exercise, I homed in on the one other activity that had the ability to calm me and give me a pleasurable high: shopping.

LIFE IN THE CLOSET

Say I had had a stressful day. I'd think, *Time to go shopping!* A fight with a boyfriend? *Hit the mall!* Praise from my boss? *How late is the jewelry store open?* Throughout my 20s, as I worked administrative jobs in Silicon Valley, I shopped all the time. It's what I did several times a week on my lunch break and where I stopped on my drive home. My father had cosigned for my first credit card; I quickly maxed it out. He paid it off, assuring me that everyone gets in trouble once. When I ran up the card again, he once again paid it off, with the agreement that I'd cancel it. I did. However, I later applied for my own store credit card, ran it up to the limit, applied for a card at a different store, and so on. I paid the minimum on each card and ignored the growing balances.

I felt insecure in my everyday life, but when I shopped, an internal switch flipped. I became bubbly and extroverted, chatting and laughing with sales clerks. I stood taller and moved more purposefully. And, given my body-image issues, it stoked my ego to hear clerks gush, "You look so good in that!"

The euphoria never lasted. I deflated as soon as I left the mall. Driving home, my backseat filled with tissue-wrapped purchases, I felt exhausted, hungover even. Later, when the bills came and I saw how much I'd spent, I literally became nauseous.



I'd heard of the term "shopping addiction," but I didn't think it applied to me. I wasn't in danger of being thrown out of my apartment. I could pay the several hundred dollars of minimum monthly payments on my cards. I just believed that I wasn't making enough money to afford my high-quality tastes. As soon as I brought in more income, I reasoned, I could better support my lifestyle.

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HOOKED ON A FEELING

In 1999 I met Mike, an engineer, near Lake Tahoe, Nevada. He and I had the same sense of humor. I also admired his spontaneity and easygoing nature. We started a long-distance relationship, which continued even when I moved from the Bay Area to outside of Denver for a job.

I was lonely living in a new city, and I missed Mike. So, as usual, I went shopping. Soon I had maxed out all eight of my credit cards. I was horrified—mostly because I realized that, until I paid them down, I wouldn't be able to buy anything else. (I did have some ability to set limits for myself, thankfully.)

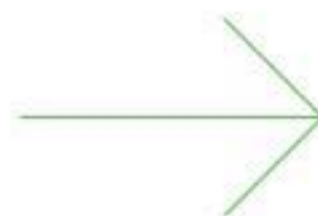
Without shopping, I was restless and anxious.

The only way I made it through was with long workouts (a throwback from my anorexic days) and by staying late at the office. After several months, I'd proudly paid down a sizable chunk of my debt. To celebrate, I went, well, you know.

I no longer remember what clothing I bought that day or how much I spent, but I do recall the sensation. It was similar to when, as a teenager, I had binged on sweets after having eaten nothing for days. I felt exhilaration—followed rapidly by despair.

Mike and I got married in 2001 and a year later moved to San Diego, where he began working as a financial trader. He knew that I liked to shop but had no clue about the depth of my compulsion. However, he got an inkling once we started to live on a shared budget.

We had both agreed that I could spend about \$250 per month on clothing. I had every intention of sticking to this plan. But my vow didn't last long.



As happy as I was with Mike, I felt aimless, adrift. I billed myself as a life coach (ironic, I know) but had no idea how to market myself and build my business. I found myself strolling through boutiques, again looking for the designer jacket that would give me the confidence I needed.

Mike was unhappy when he realized that I'd gone over budget several times. "Why?" he asked, in his kind way. I didn't really answer but agreed to cut back my spending. This was a conversation we had over and over again.

Some years I spent as much as \$7,000 on clothes alone. The Internet made it so easy. I got my shopping fix at home. I subscribed to fashion forums frequented by compulsive shoppers and pored over style blogs.

I cared more about looking for the "perfect" blouse or coat to buy than wearing what I purchased. At times I was unsettled to realize that I already had one, or even two, of the same item. Many items just stayed in my closet with the tags on.

LEARNING TO WANT LESS

After several years of marriage, Mike grew frustrated. At one point, he asked me to take charge of our household finances, hoping the task would make me more responsible. Instead I bought shoes with the money we had allocated for another category, like "household." Or I'd enter my purchases under a different month so it wouldn't look as if I'd gone over budget in the current one.

When Mike learned that I'd overspent *and* deceived him, we got into a heated discussion. I ended up in tears, angry at myself for disappointing him. Even after my breakdown while watching *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, I still brought home something new several times a week. Eventually Mike had to cut down on his favorite hobby, flying single-engine planes, to make up for the money I'd spent. I was ashamed that my need to shop had forced him to give up something he loved. But shopping was the only thing I seemed good at. I couldn't imagine my life without it.

In 2011 I decided to become a personal stylist. I hoped that shopping for others would put my obsession to good use while giving me some extra income. It wasn't a good plan. Envious of my clients' growing wardrobes, I shopped more frantically to keep up.

I would read books about having issues with shopping, and I tried an online program that encouraged people to go a year without shopping,



but I couldn't commit. My turning point came at the end of 2012. I'd been tracking the clothes I bought and what I actually wore. When I tallied up the numbers, I was shocked. Half of what I owned had been worn only once or not at all during the entire year. Seeing how much money I'd wasted made me realize: I needed to change.

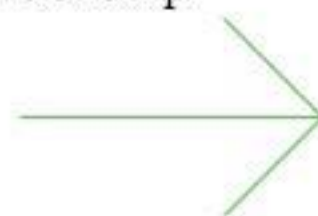
FOR THE FIRST TIME, I COULD SEE GLIMPSES OF SPACE IN MY CLOSET—AND I DIDN'T RUN TO THE MALL TO FILL THEM. BUT I HAVEN'T MADE A COMPLETE RECOVERY. I STRUGGLE.

I didn't seek out therapy. I had been through years of it for my eating disorder and thought I could apply the same lessons to recover from my compulsive shopping. With Mike's support, I started a blog that January (recoveringshopaholic.com) in which I would confess my addiction and hold myself accountable. After a month, I received my first comment: "I can identify," the woman admitted. "Thanks for your words." I was so happy to find out that I had helped someone, that the experiences that had caused me so much grief could make a positive difference in other people's lives.

As more comments trickled in from women who struggled with shopping, I felt that I owed it to them to recover. That spring I took on another blogger's challenge to drastically pare down my closet. For three months, I wore only the same 33 items (not including shoes) and boxed up the remainder of my clothing. It was nerve-racking; I panicked that I wouldn't choose the "best" 33 things. However, the exercise helped me understand that I didn't need so much stuff. By the time the challenge was over, I had sold or donated 100 articles of clothing. For the first time, I could see glimpses of space in my closet—and I didn't run to the mall to fill them.

I haven't made a complete recovery. I struggle. If a few weeks go by and I haven't purchased a clothing item, I feel the need welling up. But I'm on my way. I set rules for my shopping now and abide by them. For example, I never just "go shopping." I tell Mike, "I have to buy X." And that's usually what I do. I don't buy things just because they're on sale anymore. I'd rather spend more on one quality item that's going to last. Instead of mindlessly purchasing something that catches my eye, I tell myself, "You already have that" or "Buying that wouldn't be wise."

Because I'm no longer hiding my problem from Mike, our relationship



has improved. When I get the urge to sneak out to stores, I ask him to take a long walk with me.

Recently, my mother, who isn't computer-savvy, asked me to order her something from Nordstrom. When I went to the site, I was shocked to see that their legendary twice-a-year sale was in progress.

A year ago, this event would have been marked on my calendar. I would have perused the site ahead of time and bookmarked what to buy. Maybe I would even have stood by the front doors when the store opened, feeling that same rush: *I wonder what I'll find!* This time I left my shopping cart empty. And, in doing so, I experienced a new sort of joy. ■

SHOPPING ADDICTION 2.0

As many as 1 in 10 Americans has an obsessive need to shop, otherwise known as oniomania—from the Greek words *onios* (meaning “for sale”) and *mania* (“madness”). This affliction is nothing new, but digital culture, with its 24/7 access to shopping, has made matters worse, says David Sack, a board-certified addiction psychiatrist and the CEO of the Promises Treatment Center, based in Malibu, California. “One-click purchasing, next-day delivery, shopping apps, and flash sales all capitalize on our desire for immediate gratification,” says Sack. “We’re able to shop anytime, anywhere, and technology allows us to do so without feeling like we’ve spent any money.”

Shopping addiction stems from many of the same causes as drug and alcohol addiction and, perhaps surprisingly, afflicts women and men in roughly equal numbers. What unites many of the sufferers: “The rush of buying something new may ease stress, boredom, and loneliness,” says Sack. “For some people, accumulating things of value gives them value.”

Many people don't realize that they have this compulsion. Some don't realize that it's possible to become addicted to an everyday behavior,

says Sack. Or they believe that they can't have a problem if they're able to stay afloat financially.

So what are the signs that your shopping has gone from a fun, harmless pastime to a clinical addiction? Loss of control, for starters: You go into a store with one item on your list and leave with 10. Compulsive shoppers also tend to hide their purchases or lie about how much they've spent. They may have secret bank or credit-card accounts. After the high of shopping, they experience an emotional letdown or intense feelings of guilt and shame, which drives them to shop more. Like drug addicts, people addicted to shopping may even experience withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability, when they try to cut back.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy, medications, and support groups, like Debtors Anonymous (debtorsanonymous.org), can all be beneficial. Since a shopping addiction can go hand in hand with other mental-health issues, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and compulsive gambling, it's crucial to come clean about all issues. “Otherwise you'll end up swapping one addiction for another,” says Sack, “never truly addressing the root causes.”