

Resisting the Desire to Acquire

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Adapted from "Buried in Treasures," Chapter 9 (David Tolin, Randy Frost, & Gail Steketee, 2007, Oxford University Press).

- Do you buy more things than you need or can use or can afford?
- If you find a bargain, can you walk away without buying the item?
- If a friend offers you an item in good condition, can you turn it down?
- When offered a free item, like a pen, brochure, or newspaper, do you take 1 (or 2 or 3) home with you?
- Do you frequently print articles from the internet even if you have not finished reading ones you previously printed?

People develop problems with acquiring bought or free items for any number of reasons. Some people acquire too many things because they really enjoy getting new things, something that can become hard to control. Other people get into trouble with acquiring because they do it to feel better when they're upset or angry. Still other people may head out to purchase or acquire something they need and then find other items at the store that they end up buying even though they don't really need them. Whatever the reason that a person acquires too many things, the methods in this article have been developed to help bring acquiring under control. The methods need to be practiced in many different situations where the person has acquired things in the past.

Perhaps the hardest part of overcoming an acquiring problem is resisting strong urges to acquire. This is a struggle between the short-term payoff of feeling good or being distracted from unpleasant thoughts and feelings, and the long-term cost of spending too much money and/or crowding one's house with too many possessions. A person wanting to use this plan to overcome acquiring urges and behavior would engage in five steps:

1. Determine what he or she acquires.
2. Understand why he or she acquires.
3. Develop strategies to think differently about his or her acquiring decisions.
4. Use the strategies in a series of "non-shopping" trips to learn how to better tolerate the triggers and urges to acquire.
5. Develop strategies for finding enjoyment and coping with unpleasantness in other ways.

1. Determining what the person acquires.

The first step requires tracking one's acquiring for a week or two, recording everything that comes into the house. This includes the whole range of acquisitions: delivery packages, store purchases (including bags and receipts), handouts and flyers you, newspapers and magazines, demo freebies, gifts, subscriptions (e.g., magazines), catalog orders, TV and web purchases, free or low-cost items from friends, the trash, yard sales or flea markets, extras purchased just in case, and,

for some people, even stolen items. The person should make a list of each type of item and then next to the item he or she should place a number from 0 to 10. This number indicates how the person would feel about not acquiring that item, with 0 being “fine” and 10 being “awful.”

2. Understanding why the person acquires.

Very often, a buying or acquiring episode begins with an emotional vulnerability. Different people may acquire in reaction to different emotional states. For example, “Julie” anticipates her trips to a flea market with delight whereas “Angela” begins by feeling anxious and overwhelmed and then finds she has headed out to a flea market. While in this emotional state, a trigger or cue for acquiring usually sets off the episode. This could be the sight of a potential treasure or a sale notice. The trigger is a sight, sound, or other experience that gets the person really thinking about acquiring.

Thoughts about oneself and about acquiring determine what happens next. For example, Julie has thoughts of how wonderful it would be to acquire a treasure and has an elaborate and extensive set of ideas about the usefulness and value of the treasure, but virtually no thoughts about the costs or disadvantages of buying. Angela thinks about how an item might make her feel better, and also, quite emphatically, that she deserves to feel better. Like Julie, she too does not ponder the costs or disadvantages of buying. These various thoughts make both Julie and Angela vulnerable to developing and maintaining a problem with acquisition.

Once the person has acquired the item, he or she may experience an immediate emotional payoff. For Julie and Angela, acquiring their treasures at the flea market and the department store led to immediate feelings of relief, joy, and even a sense of victory. This type of feeling leads them to do the same sort of buying behavior again and again, and so they become “hooked” on acquiring.

Predictably, this “high” of acquiring wears off in anywhere from a few minutes to a few weeks after the acquisition, and then the person often feels regret. Julie and Angela both eventually realized that they had spent money they needed for other things, and that they didn’t have room to display or use their treasures. In fact, the realization that their new purchases just joined the piles in their already cluttered homes was depressing.

Before long, this regret often turns to some pretty serious negative conclusions about themselves. After a while, Julie thought to herself, “I am weak” and Angela thought, “There is something wrong with me” and even, “I am worthless.” These kinds of thoughts tend to deepen negative moods like sadness and frustration. Alas, Julie and Angela have a means to cope with their unhappy moods: by acquiring more! This leads to a vicious cycle.

To break this cycle, the person with the acquiring problem needs to make explicit what drives their own acquiring. To do this, he or she can recall a recent acquisition or be ready with pen and paper after the next one. We suggest writing down the emotional state just preceding the acquisition event, what triggered the event, what thoughts arose around acquiring just after the trigger, the emotional experience immediately after acquiring, any feeling of regret, and any negative conclusions drawn from the acquiring event and its consequences.

3. Developing strategies to think differently about acquiring.

With a better understanding of what is acquired and why, people can find a way to change their responses. Beginning with thoughts that make acquiring more likely, we have noticed that many

people who acquire compulsively seem to lose themselves in the moment. That is, they seem to get “hyper-focused,” forgetting about the rest of their lives and thinking only about the item in front of them. The strategy to counteract this is to help them keep in mind other important considerations in their lives while making decisions about acquiring.

A simple and straightforward way for a person to keep perspective while shopping or acquiring is for him or her to establish a firm set of rules to go by. Here are some examples of rules that help to maintain perspective on acquiring:

“I cannot get this unless:

- I plan to use it within the next month
- I have enough money right now to pay for it
- I have a place to put it so it doesn’t add to my clutter
- Buying this will not make it harder to get other things I know I need
- I am sure I truly want this and will not return it
- Acquiring this item is consistent with my goals and values for my life
- I have a true NEED, not just a wish, for this item”

Another good strategy is to develop the habit of consulting a list of questions before acquiring anything but essential items (e.g., groceries to be consumed over the course of the week).

- Do I already own something similar?
- Am I buying this because I feel bad (angry, depressed, etc.) right now?
- Will I regret getting this in a week?
- Could I manage without it?
- Do I have enough time to fix/use this or do I have more important priorities?
- Do I want it just because I’m looking at it now?
- Will *not* getting this help me solve my hoarding problem?

A third method for keeping perspective on acquisition is for the person to think about the advantages of not buying something new versus the disadvantages of doing so. The two lists can then be compared and a decision made. For example, to work on her urges to buy more clothes, Julie generated some advantages and disadvantages of doing so:

Advantages of buying more clothes

- *Feeling good about having new things to wear*
- *Reducing bad feelings if I’m in a funk*
- *Not losing out on a good bargain*

Disadvantages of buying more clothes

- *Spending more money than I should*
- *Feeling guilty*
- *Making it harder to go on the vacation I really want*
- *Adding to the clutter in my bedroom*
- *Making my husband mad because I spent money I shouldn’t have*

She was able to generate more disadvantages of acquiring than advantages, and the disadvantages were also stronger and more compelling. Julie might also have considered the advantages of NOT buying more clothes, especially the emotional advantages. For example, she would probably feel more in control and better able to choose, rather than feeling compelled to buy.

4. Helping the person learn to tolerate triggers to acquisition.

Almost anything can trigger the urge to acquire. For Thomas, a particular exit from the highway (that led to his favorite music store) was one of his triggers to go shopping. For Frank, an argument with his wife was a trigger. Triggers can evoke powerful urges to acquire that may seem impossible to control. It thus makes good sense for someone with an acquisition problem to learn to avoid these triggers in order to prevent compelling urges. However, by itself, avoidance is at best only partially effective as a solution. Instead, people with an acquisition problem are encouraged to expose themselves to gradually more powerful acquiring triggers to bolster their resistance. As they learn to tolerate the more manageable urges provoked by relatively “weak” triggers, they become able to tolerate more powerful triggers without succumbing to acquiring.

The person is encouraged to make a list of all the triggers to acquisition that he or she can think of. In addition, he or she should rate how intense the urge to acquire is for each of these triggers, with 0 being “not at all intense” and 10 being “as intense as I can imagine”. Related to this, the person can imagine how uncomfortable he or she would feel if he or she ignored the urge. The items on the list should be ordered so that the least intense urge is at the top of the list and the most intense is at the bottom. This is an acquisition hierarchy and from this list, the person can begin to work with situations involving the least intense urges. Below is Julie's non-acquiring hierarchy:

Situation	Urge/Discomfort (0-10)
1. Driving past things others have left curbside	1
2. Driving past the flea market	2
3. Walking into the flea market and looking around	4
4. Walking around the tables at a flea market	5
5. Picking things up at a flea market without buying	7
6. Picking up a “treasure” that someone has left curbside	9

To practice tolerating urges to acquire, he or she exposes him or herself to actual situations from the non-acquiring list, beginning with the weakest urges/least uncomfortable situations. What is key is for the person to tolerate the situation without acquiring, allowing him or herself to habituate to the situation and thereby find it less uncomfortable. This takes repeated practice, perhaps with a friend or family member accompanying the person as a “coach.” We usually recommend gradual steps, beginning with drive-by non-shopping excursions, then walk-through non-shopping (without touching anything), and finally the hardest step, handling things without buying or otherwise acquiring them.

5. Develop strategies for finding enjoyment and coping in other ways.

Another critical component for overcoming an acquisition problem is for the person to find other activities that replace the enjoyment that acquiring provides. He or she will need to brain storm a short list of choices that can replace the pleasurable acquiring experience. Importantly, this list should include choices that the person can engage in on short notice, whether alone or with others.

The list might include such choices as:

- Visiting a museum or other place of interest (historic home, local fair)
- Going to a library and checking out interesting books
- Watching a film in the theater or at home
- Going to a restaurant with friends
- Taking a walk or hike with friends
- Taking a class at the local high school
- Attending a community meeting or gathering of interest
- Working on a craft project

To encourage the use of this list, the person should put the most interesting ideas at the top of the list and then post it in a location where it will catch his or her attention, such as on the refrigerator or in a calendar. To get into new habits, the person should make times to practice replacing acquisition with other activities over a period of weeks. When he or she engages in replacement activities, he or she should notice how much enjoyment he or she actually felt when doing the activity. Recording a number can help to make the level of enjoyment explicit, e.g., from 0=no enjoyment to 10=strong enjoyment. As the individual finds other activities to be equally, if not more enjoyable, compared to acquiring, he or she will be motivated to continue to enjoy these other activities. If the person shops or collect to improve his or her mood, he or she will also need to find some other ways to cope with bad feelings like depression or guilt or anger. Some of the listed activities will be helpful in this regard. For example, calling a friend or watching a funny program on TV may help to lighten one's mood without encouraging any unwanted acquiring. Other coping strategies can be found in *Buried in Treasures* by Drs. Tolin, Frost and Steketee (Oxford University Press, 2007). These might include problem solving methods or other ways to manage one's mood. With this combination of methods, the person's excessive acquiring could soon be a thing of the past.

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