

# Oniomania (Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD))

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October 2, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Oniomania (Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD))*.  
PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=33341>

## Oniomania (Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD))

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Clinical Psychology, Psychiatry, Behavioral Economics**

### 1. Core Definition and Phenomenology

**Oniomania**, commonly referred to as **Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD)**, is characterized by an uncontrollable and often overwhelming urge to engage in shopping and purchasing behaviors. This compulsion extends beyond mere desire or recreational activity, manifesting as a persistent and intrusive preoccupation with buying, irrespective of a genuine need for the items. Individuals afflicted with oniomania experience significant distress and functional impairment as a direct consequence of their excessive and often expensive shopping sprees, leading to a profound disruption in their daily lives and personal well-being.

The defining feature of CBD is the pervasive lack of control over buying impulses. While the act of shopping might initially provide a temporary sense of euphoria, excitement, or relief from negative emotional states, these feelings are typically transient and are quickly followed by profound guilt, shame, regret, and anxiety. This cyclical pattern of intense craving, impulsive buying, and subsequent emotional distress forms the core phenomenology of the disorder, perpetuating a self-defeating cycle that can be exceedingly difficult to break without professional intervention.

Unlike occasional extravagant purchases or habitual recreational shopping, oniomania involves a deeply ingrained behavioral pattern where the buying acts are driven by internal psychological mechanisms rather than external utility. The focus shifts from the utility of the purchased item to the act of buying itself, which serves as a coping mechanism for underlying emotional or psychological discomfort. This distinction is crucial for understanding the maladaptive nature of the disorder and its classification among behavioral addictions.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "oniomania" itself provides insight into its nature, originating from two Greek words: "onios," meaning "**for sale**", and "mania," signifying "**madness**" or "**frenzy**." This etymological root underscores the intense, almost frantic, and often irrational nature of the compulsive buying behavior. The concept of excessive buying as a psychological concern is not entirely new; early observations of such behaviors date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when pioneering psychiatrists began to categorize various forms of impulse control disorders.

One of the earliest formal descriptions of pathological buying was made by German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin in 1915, who used the term "oniomania" to describe patients exhibiting an irresistible urge to buy, often for unnecessary items, leading to financial ruin. This initial conceptualization positioned oniomania alongside other impulse control disorders such as

kleptomania and pyromania. Throughout the 20th century, various researchers and clinicians contributed to the understanding of compulsive buying, noting its distinct features and exploring its psychological underpinnings, although its diagnostic status remained a subject of ongoing debate.

The recognition of oniomania as a distinct behavioral pattern has evolved significantly over time, paralleling the broader development of psychiatric nosology. While early descriptions were often anecdotal, modern research has increasingly applied rigorous scientific methodologies to study its prevalence, phenomenology, and comorbidity. This historical trajectory reflects a gradual shift from merely observing peculiar behaviors to attempting to understand their underlying causes, mechanisms, and effective treatments, thereby solidifying its place as a significant area of study within clinical psychology and psychiatry.

### 3. Diagnostic Considerations and Proposed Criteria

Despite growing research and clinical observations, **Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD)** is notably not included as a formal diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). This exclusion reflects ongoing debates within the psychiatric community regarding its classification, particularly whether it constitutes a standalone addiction, an impulse control disorder, or a symptom of another underlying condition. Nevertheless, a robust set of proposed diagnostic criteria has been developed and is widely used in research and clinical assessment to identify and characterize the disorder.

The proposed diagnostic criteria for oniomania typically include several key elements. Firstly, an individual must exhibit an over-preoccupation with buying, regardless of whether the item(s) are genuinely needed. This goes beyond normal consumer interest to an obsessive level of thought and planning centered around shopping. Secondly, the behavior must result in significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. This distress can manifest as guilt, anxiety, depression, or shame following a buying episode.

Furthermore, the proposed criteria specify that the buying behavior must not occur exclusively during periods of mania or hypomania, distinguishing CBD from excessive spending that might be symptomatic of bipolar disorder. This distinction is critical for accurate differential diagnosis. Lastly, there must be a persistent obsession with buying and a recurrent feeling of dissatisfaction despite repeated purchases, indicating that the act of buying itself, rather than the acquisition of goods, is the primary driver. These criteria collectively aim to differentiate compulsive buying from normative shopping habits and from other psychiatric conditions that may involve excessive spending.

### 4. Behavioral and Psychological Manifestations

The behavioral and psychological manifestations of oniomania extend far beyond the mere act of purchasing. Individuals struggling with this disorder often experience a complex array of adverse

consequences that deeply impact their lives. Financially, the expensive shopping sprees can lead to significant debt, bankruptcy, and severe economic hardship, not only for the individual but also for their families. They may resort to secretive spending, maxing out credit cards, or even illegal activities to fund their addiction, further exacerbating their financial woes.

Psychologically, the cycle of compulsive buying is typically accompanied by intense emotional turmoil. Before a buying episode, individuals may experience heightened tension, anxiety, or craving, which is temporarily relieved by the act of purchasing. However, this fleeting euphoria is almost invariably followed by profound feelings of guilt, shame, regret, and self-loathing. This emotional distress can contribute to or exacerbate co-occurring mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders, creating a vicious cycle where buying is used to cope with negative emotions, only to generate more negative emotions.

Socially, oniomania can severely strain personal relationships. Secrecy, deception about purchases, and financial difficulties can erode trust with partners, family members, and friends. The time and energy consumed by compulsive buying can also lead to neglect of daily responsibilities, work performance issues, and social isolation. The cumulative effect of these behavioral and psychological manifestations is a significant reduction in overall quality of life and a pervasive sense of helplessness and despair for those caught in the grip of the disorder.

## 5. Prevalence and Comorbidity

Estimates of the prevalence of compulsive buying disorder vary across studies and populations, but it is generally considered to affect a notable percentage of the adult population, often ranging from 2% to 8% in Western industrialized countries. Research consistently indicates a higher prevalence among women compared to men, although the reasons for this gender disparity are complex and may relate to societal expectations, marketing strategies, and differing coping mechanisms. The disorder typically emerges in late adolescence or early adulthood, often intensifying with age if left unaddressed.

A significant aspect of oniomania is its high rate of comorbidity with other mental health conditions. It frequently co-occurs with mood disorders, particularly major depressive disorder and various anxiety disorders. The compulsive buying behavior may serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism to alleviate symptoms of depression or anxiety, providing a temporary escape or sense of control. This intricate relationship between CBD and other mood disturbances highlights the importance of a comprehensive diagnostic assessment that considers the full spectrum of an individual's psychological well-being.

Furthermore, compulsive buying disorder often presents alongside other impulse control disorders, such as kleptomania or gambling disorder, as well as with substance use disorders and eating disorders. This clustering of conditions suggests common underlying neurobiological pathways or

psychological vulnerabilities related to impulse control, reward processing, and emotional regulation. Addressing these co-occurring conditions is paramount for successful treatment outcomes, as ignoring them can undermine efforts to manage the compulsive buying behavior itself.

## 6. Significance and Impact

The significance of oniomania extends beyond individual suffering, impacting public health, economic systems, and societal norms. As a recognized behavioral addiction, even without formal DSM-5 inclusion, it underscores the evolving understanding of addiction beyond substance dependency. Its prevalence highlights the challenges individuals face in a consumer-driven society where credit is readily available and marketing relentlessly encourages acquisition, creating fertile ground for the development of such disorders.

The economic impact of compulsive buying is substantial, both at the micro and macro levels. For individuals, it often leads to severe financial distress, including overwhelming debt, bankruptcy, and loss of assets. On a broader scale, while individual purchases might contribute to economic activity, the overall costs associated with managing the consequences of CBD--such as healthcare for associated mental health issues, legal costs, and social welfare support--represent a significant societal burden.

Beyond financial and psychological costs, oniomania impacts social structures and public discourse. It challenges the conventional view of shopping as a benign leisure activity, prompting a re-evaluation of the psychological forces that drive consumer behavior. Recognizing and understanding CBD is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies, public health campaigns, and supportive interventions that can mitigate its pervasive negative effects on individuals, families, and communities.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

The primary debate surrounding oniomania revolves around its diagnostic classification and its exclusion from mainstream diagnostic manuals like the DSM-5. Critics argue that its exclusion delays research, hampers access to treatment, and diminishes its recognition as a serious mental health condition. The reasons for its omission are multifaceted, often citing a perceived lack of sufficient empirical data, concerns about excessive medicalization of everyday behaviors, and significant overlap with other recognized disorders.

One of the central criticisms is the difficulty in clearly delineating compulsive buying from "normal" indulgent shopping, particularly in cultures that highly value materialism and consumption. The line between enthusiastic consumerism and pathological behavior can appear blurred, leading some to question whether it represents a distinct disorder or rather a symptom of underlying mood, anxiety,

or impulse control issues. This debate necessitates a careful consideration of the severity, distress, and functional impairment associated with the buying behavior to distinguish it from normative patterns.

Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions about whether oniomania should be classified as an impulse control disorder, an obsessive-compulsive related disorder, or a behavioral addiction. Each classification has implications for understanding its etiology, neurobiology, and most effective treatment approaches. While there is a growing consensus among researchers that it shares significant characteristics with behavioral addictions, the lack of a definitive diagnostic home continues to pose challenges for clinicians and researchers alike, fueling continued academic discourse and scientific inquiry into its nature and nosology.

## 8. Treatment and Management Strategies

Given the significant adverse consequences associated with oniomania, seeking professional help is strongly recommended for individuals experiencing this uncontrollable urge. Even though it is not formally recognized as a stand-alone addiction in the DSM-5, its impact on an individual's daily tasks and social roles necessitates targeted therapeutic interventions. Effective treatment strategies typically involve a multidisciplinary approach, addressing both the behavioral symptoms and any underlying psychological issues.

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** is one of the most widely used and effective psychological interventions for compulsive buying disorder. CBT helps individuals identify the triggers for their buying sprees, challenge irrational thoughts associated with shopping, and develop healthier coping mechanisms for managing stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions that typically precede buying episodes. Through techniques such as impulse delay, exposure and response prevention, and cognitive restructuring, individuals learn to regain control over their purchasing behavior.

In addition to psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy may be considered, particularly if comorbid conditions like depression or anxiety are present. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are often prescribed to help manage mood and anxiety symptoms, which can indirectly reduce the intensity of compulsive urges. Other supportive measures, such as financial counseling to address debt and establish budgeting strategies, participation in support groups (e.g., Debtors Anonymous), and family therapy to address relational conflicts caused by the disorder, are also crucial components of a comprehensive treatment plan aimed at fostering long-term recovery and improved quality of life.

## Further Reading

[Compulsive Buying Disorder - Wikipedia](#)

[American Psychiatric Association - Compulsive Buying Disorder](#)

American Psychological Association - Compulsive Buying  
Compulsive Buying Disorder: A Systematic Review - NCBI

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