

Gregoire, C. (2017, December 7). The psychology of materialism, and why it's making you unhappy. *Huffington Post*. Accessed at:

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/psychology-materialism_n_4425982

More money, more problems? It might just be true. Americans today, compared to 55 years ago, own twice as many cars and eat out twice as much per person, but we don't seem to be any happier because of it. Rather than rising levels of well-being, we've seen mounting credit card debt and increasing numbers of self-storage facilities to house the things we compulsively buy.

The holidays in particular have become a time when consumer culture comes out in full force. Black Friday, the annual post-Thanksgiving discount shopping spree, results each year in multiple deaths and injuries of consumers trampled by crowds in stores and shopping malls.

In a poignant, viral *Huffington Post* blog last month, "If You Shop On Thanksgiving, You're Part Of The Problem," writer Matt Walsh cast a harsh light on what the holiday shopping frenzy really says about our culture:

That's our entire economic system: buy things. Everybody buy. It doesn't matter what you buy. Just buy. It doesn't matter if you don't have money. Just buy. Our entire civilization now rests on the assumption that, no matter what else happens, we will all continue to buy lots and lots of things. Buy, buy, buy, buy, buy. And then buy a little more. Don't create, or produce, or discover -- just buy. Never save, never invest, never cut back -- just buy. Buy what you don't need with money you don't have... Buy like you breathe, only more frequently.

To some extent, most of us participate in consumer culture and value material possessions, and that's perfectly fine. But in excess, materialism can take a toll on your well-being, relationships and quality of life. **Here are six things you should know about the psychology of consumption -- and strategies to find freedom from materialism.**

Consumer culture may be harming individual well-being.



Research suggests that Americans' well-being has, if anything, declined since the 1950s, according to the American Psychological Association, while our consumption has only increased.

"Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology," David G. Myers, author of *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of*

Plenty, wrote in an American Psychologist article. "Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well-being."

The materialistic values that consumer cultures support may be to blame. Those who pursue wealth and material possessions tend to be less satisfied and experience fewer positive emotions each day. On the other hand, research has found that life satisfaction -- surprise, surprise -- is correlated with having less materialistic values.

Materialist values are linked to Type-A behavior.



Are you highly ambitious and competitive? It could mean you're also more materialistic. Australian research from the 1990s found materialist values and a possessions-based definition of success share common characteristics with type-A behaviors, including competitiveness and aggression. A 2008 study published in the Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology reiterated the finding that the desire to accumulate wealth and possessions is related to Type-A qualities.

Money really can't buy you happiness.



The Beatles wisely noted that money can't buy love, and we'd do well to remember that money can't buy happiness, either. Research has shown that there is no direct correlation between income and happiness. Once our basic needs are met, wealth makes very little difference to one's overall well-being and happiness. And in fact, extremely wealthy people actually suffer from higher rates of depression.

“The failure of additional wealth and consumption to help people have satisfying lives may be the most eloquent argument for reevaluating our current approach to consumption,” the authors of Worldwatch Institute's 2011 State of Consumption report wrote.

Some data, however, *has* suggested that there could be a link between higher income and increased life satisfaction. It seems that it may not be the money itself that leads to dissatisfaction, but rather, the continual striving for greater wealth and more possessions that is linked to unhappiness.

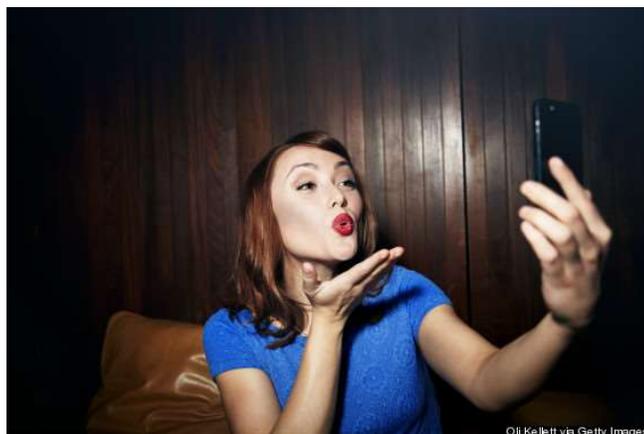
Materialism could ruin your relationships.



Can money buy you love? Not so much, and according to a study published in the Journal Of Couple & Marriage Therapy, materialism is actually correlated with unhappiness in marriages. Researchers studied more than 1,700 couples to find that those in which both partners had high levels of materialism exhibited lower marital quality than couples with lower materialism scores. Previous studies have found that students with higher extrinsic, materialistic values tend to have lower-quality relationships, and to feel less connected to others.

Materialistic people also typically have less pro-social and empathetic qualities, both towards others and towards the environment.

Consumer cultures may breed narcissistic personalities.



Some psychologists have suggested that consumer cultures may contribute to the development of narcissistic personalities and behaviors, "by focusing individuals on the

glorification of consumption," psychologist Tim Kasser [wrote in The High Price Of Materialis.](#) Narcissists generally act with arrogance and are deeply concerned with issues of personal adequacy, seeking power and prestige to cover for feelings of inner emptiness and low-self worth, Kasser explains.

"Narcissists' desire for external validation fits well with our conception of materialistic values as extrinsic and focused on others' praise," he writes. "Thus it was not surprising to find that students with strong materialistic tendencies scored high on a standard measure of narcissism, agreeing with statements such as 'I am more capable than other people' ... 'I wish somebody would write my biography someday.'"

Consumerism is fueled by insecurity -- and remedied by mindfulness.



Research suggests that materialistic values are fueled by insecurity. A 2002 study published in the journal *Psychology and Marketing* found that those who chronically doubt themselves and their own self-worth tend to be more materialistic.

Consumerism -- which has been called a "modern religion" -- tends to capitalize on this insecurity and use it to sell products.

"In a practical sense, consumerism is a belief system and culture that promotes consuming as the path to self- and social improvement," Stephanie Kaza, University of Vermont Environment Professor and Buddhism practitioner, wrote in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. "As a dominant cultural force, consumerism offers products to address every dissatisfaction."

So what's the antidote? Mindfulness -- the focused awareness on the present moment, which can be cultivated through meditation and contemplative practice -- may be an effective remedy to empty or compulsive consumption. As beat writer and American Buddhist thinker Allen Ginsberg put it in a 1966 letter to the *Washington Post*: "You own twice as much rug if you're twice as *aware* of the rug."

Americans are redefining success beyond money and power.



Our collective definition of the American Dream is slowly starting to change from one of materialism to a more purposeful idea of what it means to live the good life. According to the 2013 LifeTwist study, only around one-quarter of Americans still believe that wealth determines success.

"Dozens of the survey's findings reflect a new American notion of success, but perhaps none more starkly than the sentiment that Americans ranked 'having a lot of money' 20th on a list of 22 possible contributors to having a successful life," the LifeTwist Study's authors wrote in a press release. "This sentiment mirrors the steadily rising trend ... that Americans are increasingly placing greater priority on living a fulfilling life — in which being wealthy is not the most significant factor."