



ESRC Research Group on lifestyles, values and environment

# Mindfulness and Compulsive Buying

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# “Retail Therapy”



- 10-15% of population
- Women *probably* more than men
- Occurs alongside depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other compulsive behaviours

## Mindfulness

“the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”

(Kabat-Zinn, 2003)



# Conceptual Links



- **Study design:**

- Intervention: standard Mindfulness-Based Course
- 6 Compulsive Buyers (+ 2 control groups)
- Qualitative and quantitative data collection

# Before Mindfulness Intervention: Being a Compulsive Buyer

# Mental Health

- Depression: Shopping to alleviate negative affect:

*June: "I hate the house because my son's always complaining that the house is dirty and there's always jobs to do here, and I think partly it's escaping from the grind of housework and that sort of responsibility"*

- Inability to tolerate anxiety:

*Fran: "The minute, like yesterday, whether it's because I was feeling anxious, or, I found a reason to go into the shops"*

- Seeking positive affect:

*Fran: "it's how I imagine you know, like a Disney world, with sparkles, you know, it's just this colourful, exciting and lovely place to be"*

# Identity

- Threatened Identity:

*June: “as you get older you get this fear of aging, and people think I’m looking older, and you worry about aging [and] cosmetics is my greatest weakness, the expensive ones, if they’ve bought out a new face cream [ ] and it’s in my favourite brand, I have to have it”*

- Self-Discrepancy & Fragility:

*June: “it is like you’re leading a double life, there’s this woman who goes shopping all the time, who’s buying things for a, to be a woman, some other woman, and then there’s me that’s, you know, that doesn’t really know who I am any more”*

# Addictive Elements

- Inability to self-regulate:

*Fran: “once I bought one thing, that’s it, I can’t, it’s licence to, well while I’m here I’d better get this, this, this, and by the time I’d finished, just of a hundred pounds later.”*

# Consequences

- Depression, anxiety, debt:

*June: “I’m aware of depression being there, and I mean the anxiety, and of course it gets worse because the last year or two I’ve realised what an enormous debt I have mounted up and the anxiety’s so great now, I’m like treading on egg shells”*

# Social Context

- Availability of credit:

*June: “they give you credit cards, I mean, they should never have given me a credit card of three and a half thousand because it’s like someone had given me the money. It’s so irrational”*

- Relentless advertising:

*Fran: “you see all these before and after on television and think “gosh yes, they look twenty times better, that’s what I’ll look like””*

- Cultural role models

- Shopping as norm: “retail therapy”

# After Mindfulness Intervention:

## What Happens When Compulsive Buyers Learn Mindfulness

# Mental Health Changes

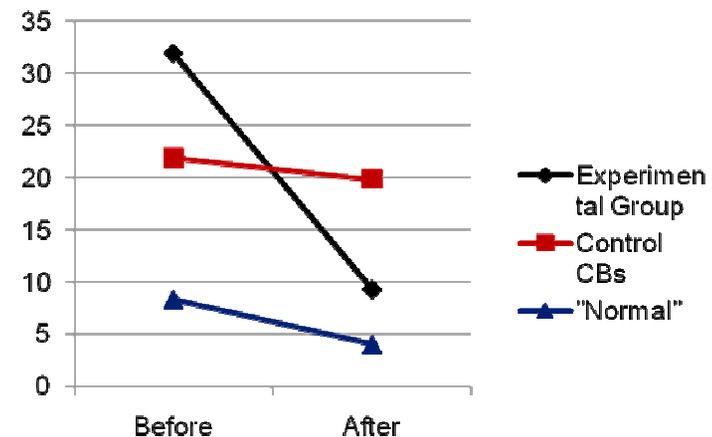
- Reduced anxiety and depression:

*June: "I've felt much more positive as well, not so down on myself"*

- Greater tolerance of negative affect:

*Fran: "I had to sit with that uncomfortable "oh I need to sort it out for him, I don't want him to be going through this", I sat with that and it sort of worked itself out."*

Depression (BDI)



# Identity

- Clearer sense of self:

*Fran: “It’s harder (to resist buying) if it’s something I do like, but then again, that’s a difference because before I wasn’t really sure what I liked and what I didn’t like [laugh], I just bought.”*

- Reduced gap between ideal and actual selves:

*Maggie: “I used to buy a lot of shoes, nice shoes for the evening, but I never go out, what’s the point? [laugh]”*

# Perspective

- Of thoughts (and not reacting):

*Fran: “if I find myself getting swept along (by thoughts), I try to step back and then think “oh that was a planning” I do an awful lot of planning thoughts, or “that was an anxious thought”. [ ] I think it makes me stop a bit and see, if you label it, it sort of almost contained, isn’t it?”*

- Of long-term:

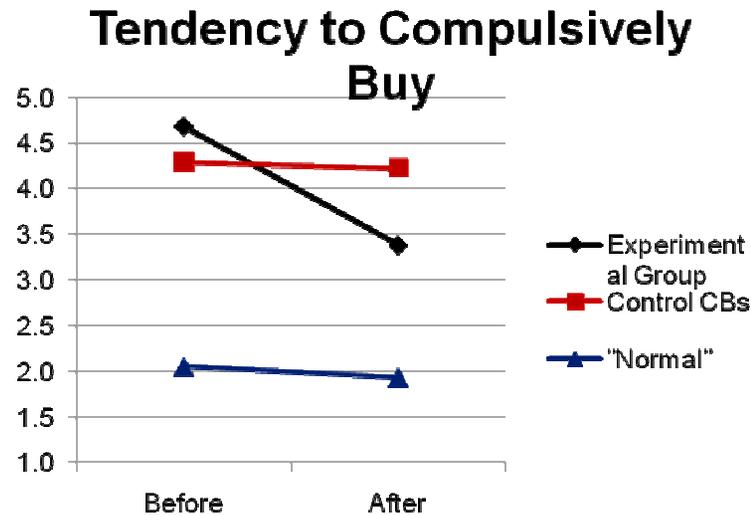
*Fran: “And also I am trying to think I suppose, whether I can afford it”*

- Of shopping cues:

*Fran: “it’s the same ole spiel over and over, if you listen to it and become fully aware”*

# Manage Shopping Urges

*Fran: "I bought that and then I got my old rush of "I bought one thing, I might as well", so, but I was aware of it, and I did buy a second thing and then I came away. 'Cause I could feel I would've gone on and on and on."*



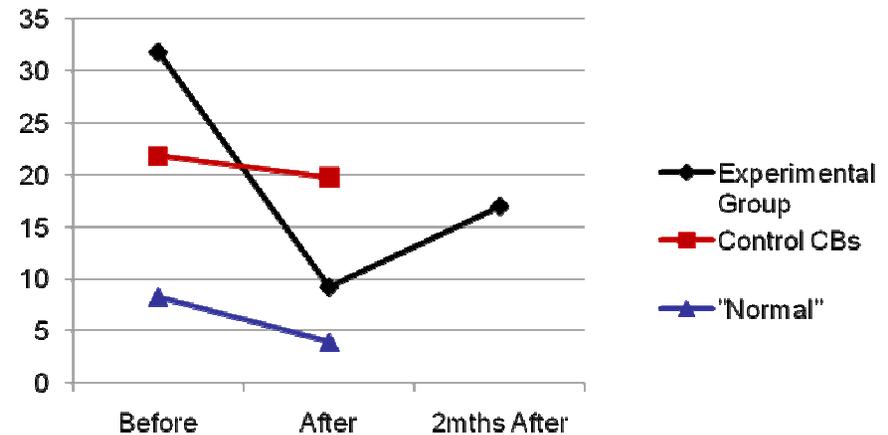
## Relationship with the Material

*June: "I've got things in my wardrobe that I can remember I wore that when I was very upset, and it's got emotional attachments. [ ] I didn't see that at all before, really, think I'm avoiding wearing that because I had an argument wearing it before, [ ] this is why I'm always looking for something new, 'cause that hasn't got the attachment. You know, clothes are just clothes."*

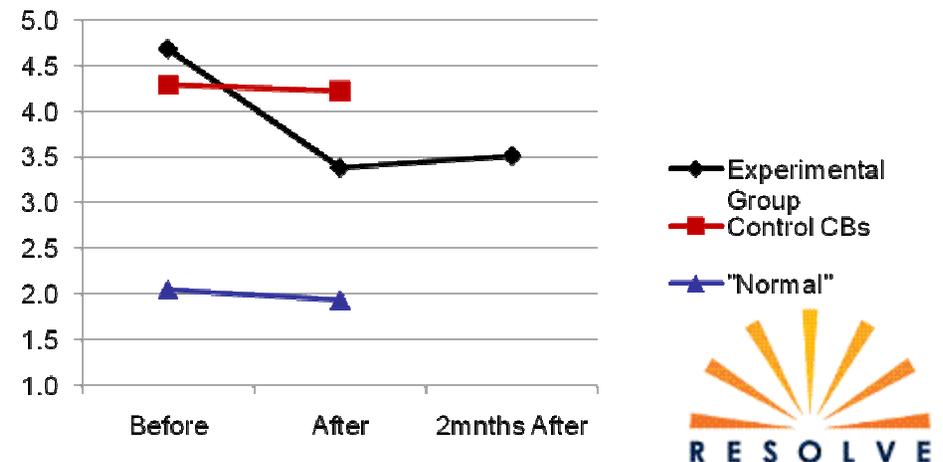
# Do the Changes Last?

- Some relapse expected and seen
- Suggestion: without wider social change these individual changes harder to maintain

## Depression (BDI)



## Tendency to Compulsively Buy



# Conclusions and Implications

- Learning mindfulness has helped these compulsive buyers:
  - Reduction to factors driving / sustaining the behaviours
  - Increased awareness and ability to manage urges
- Implications for sustainability:
  - Reduced consumption levels
  - Greater awareness of wider context
  - Wider social change required to support individual efforts



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