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Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau,
Quebec reporter for
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DISPLAY IN HEALTH UNTIL JUNE/07

Consumer culture: can it affect your health?

BY ALISON ROBERTS, MA



Some people might argue that the newly created field of professional organizers would not exist were it not for the turbo-charged consumer culture that has been diligently built and deliberately encouraged since the end of World War II, and I for one would agree with them.

With glossy catalogues, big box stores and Internet shopping on the rise, never has it been easier to purchase a plethora of products. One of the best examples of capitalism gone amuck is a nifty gadget to cut through all the excess packaging that accompanies a product. Instead of cutting down on packaging, an 'entrepreneur' has created another product that we can buy in order to open all the other things that we buy.

After decades of relentless messages to consume, we have created a legion of people who believe that we can buy our way to happiness, the 'good life' but one purchase away. While many people are realizing that this isn't true, I feel the need to state what I believe to be the obvious:

- That new faux leather couch won't save your marriage.
- The latest game boy won't mend your relationship with your teenager.
- Even the most expensive pair of shoes won't dissolve the tumour growing in your gut.

Ten years ago during a volunteer placement in Kenya, I spent four months in the absence of mainstream media. With no newspapers, electricity or public transit, I was given a reprieve from the barrage of advertising that permeates North American culture. Being disconnected from our

media-saturated world was a welcome relief, and only upon my return to Toronto did the shock of re-entering a world where public space has been co-opted by private corporations make me sit up and take notice.

The idea that our very consumer culture is making us sick is not a new one. Organizations such as Vancouver-based Adbusters firmly believe that our mental environment has been infiltrated by jingles, images and tag lines that perpetuate feelings of inadequacy, doubt and despair. Furthermore, in 1999 the Journal of the American Medical Association published a study by Myrna Weissman which concluded that people born after 1945 were ten times more likely to suffer from mental illness. I believe that our consumer culture is partly to blame.

Retail Therapy Doesn't Work

As someone who has witnessed first-hand the physical evidence of trying to 'keep up with the Jones', I am here to report that our credit ratings aren't the only thing that suffers. Our personal happiness indicator also takes a beating. How can we hope to cultivate nurturing, supportive relationships when most of what we see on television is people hopping from one person's bed to another? How can we hope to raise children with healthy body images when billboards show women posing on their hands and knees in expensive lingerie? And how can we promote self-responsibility when the pharmaceutical industry would rather us believe that the answer lies in a small blue pill?

The solution doesn't lie in a sea grass basket or a see

understanding

through tote, but rather in consciously disconnecting from the mainstream media. Motivated by profit and blatantly targeting young children, the media has played a key role in blurring our wants and needs, creating the nag factor, and facilitating a throw-away mentality. The result: work-weary parents often cave to the demands of their kids, our fragile self-esteem cracks even further and our level of debt steadily climbs.

When people live in a state of fear, safely tucked away behind deadbolts and debt, we are much easier to control. In addition, pining for another pair of shoes keeps us distracted from what is really going on in the world. While shopping in and of itself may not be hazardous to our health, it often keeps us trapped in jobs we despise just to pay the bills. In turn, we are left with very little energy to engage in our community and effect meaningful change.

If you are ready to create a different way of being that will positively impact your own sense of self and the future of the planet, check out the strategies listed below.

Make use of what you already own. Take stock of your possessions so that you know what you already own and don't mistakenly buy something that may be hidden at the back of your closet. Look at your stuff through a new set of eyes and be grateful for what you have.

Shake it up. Just like emotional eating, retail therapy is often a habitual behaviour in response to an emotional void. When you find yourself pining for a new pair of shoes, call a friend, create a vision board or go for a walk. Chances are the craving will pass and you will realize that meaningful connections with like-minded people are far more satisfying than an impulsive purchase from the mall.

Watch less TV. Never underestimate the damaging impact of incessant commercials, violent images and promiscuous plot lines. What you see on television is not real, and that includes 'reality' shows.

Live within your means. Humans were not 'born to shop' and our actions have very real consequences for ourselves and the planet. Develop hobbies, volunteer commitments

and relationships that don't revolve around buying things.

Become an advertising critic. Recognize advertisements, billboards and corporate jingles for what they are: intentional attempts to create dissatisfaction and make you buy something. Speak out, discuss them, and pronounce their ineffectiveness!

Spend time with your family. Create a weekly games night, prepare a meal from scratch or take part in a family skate or swim session at the local community centre.

Hit the mute button. If you are watching your favourite show, hit the mute button during commercials and file your papers, do some sit ups or fold your laundry. Take advantage of a 'teachable moment' and talk to your kids about what you are viewing.

Increase your self-sufficiency. Take a night school course and learn how to make your own soap, roll your own sushi or compost your garbage. Experience the satisfaction of creating your own product and developing some new skills.

While the media plays a valuable role in informing viewers of emergency situations, creating educational documentaries or describing world events, an undercurrent of fear typically permeates the air waves. Be cognizant of a tendency to watch the news or violent crime shows just before bed. Read a book, listen to classical music and alter your viewing routine.

Engaging in more conscious consumption will positively impact the size of your bank account, free up energy for more constructive activities and provide you with more time to meditate, exercise, cook or just be. Try it. There's more to life than stuff. ■

Alison Roberts has a Masters degree in Psychology and over six years of experience as a Professional Organizer. She firmly believes that our collective human potential far exceeds our current ways of being. In an effort to combat her own feelings of helplessness, she recently published her first book, Clutter's Dirty Secret.