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Gotta have it -- no matter what

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- Former spender: "I couldn't afford to be the guy I was pretending to be"
- Expert: Overspending gets spouses attention, shows them who's boss
- Psychologist: Find real issues behind spending, conquer those

By Sarah Jio

(LifeWire) -- First there were the Armani suits, then the Versace dishware and first-class airline tickets. Eventually, Josh Estrin says, his partner's need to spend consumed their relationship.

"Money seemed to be the third person in our relationship, and I got to the point where I was not willing to share him," says Estrin, 38, a nonprofit executive in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. So after six years together, he ended the relationship.

It's what Estrin calls GHS: "Gotta Have It" Syndrome, when someone's overwhelming "need" to have the latest iPhone or that new Coach bag overrules everything else -- a significant other's concerns or the fact that they may not be able to afford it in the first place.

According to a survey released in June by HSBC Bank USA, the U.S. banking unit of one of the world's largest financial services companies, plenty of Americans are splurging despite a faltering economy. The online survey of more than 1,000 households found that more than half had splurged recently, and almost as many said they did it because it simply "felt good." [iReport.com: What are you giving up?](#)

But when it comes to relationships, say experts, such spendthrift behavior can be particularly destructive.

Married to a shopaholic

Marisa Vallbona says her ex-husband's need to have it all -- right now -- led to the breakup of their marriage. "I'd go on a business trip, come home, and he'd spent the mortgage money on an electric piano, claiming that it would make him more creative in his work as a graphic designer," says Vallbona, 44, who works in public relations in San Diego.

"He'd tell me to just move money from my stock accounts to cover the mortgage," says Vallbona. "This happened repeatedly until we were down to our last penny."

Reasoning with him didn't work, she says. "He explained to me that he got an indescribable rush from shopping," she says. "He said he knew he shouldn't do it, but it made him feel so alive and the adrenaline rush was addictive. It was the most frustrating experience ever, because he just wouldn't change.

"I loved him dearly, but in the end, I realized that if I didn't divorce him, my kids and I would end up on the street."

'I couldn't stop spending'

In 2001, Joe Peacock, now 31, was a successful software developer making about \$160,000 a year. He quickly got used to buying new cars and expensive clothes, and treated himself to basically whatever he wanted.

Then came the dot-com crash and a pink slip. "When the money started drying up, I refused to quit my spending on computers, tech toys, even a car we couldn't afford." Peacock says he didn't want to acknowledge that his lifestyle had changed.

But when the realization hit that he and his new wife were more than \$70,000 in credit card debt and out of options, he says it was a big wake-up call. With his wife's help and financial support from his family, Peacock curbed his spending -- and made some serious lifestyle changes.

"The biggest thing was admitting to myself that I couldn't afford to be the guy I was pretending to be," says the Hampton, Georgia, art director. "Desire is a hard mistress to keep, and my desire was for toys, gadgets, and anything new and shiny."

So instead of buying, he kept himself busy. "I learned how to entertain myself with everyday pursuits, like running, riding a bike, hiking, and drawing in my sketchbook," he says. "These things cost nothing."

Today, Peacock is happy to report that he is completely out of debt: "Last month, we wrote our last check to a creditor, and as of right now, we are 100 percent solvent."

Help for overspenders, and those who love them

According to Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, it's important to understand the root causes of overspending. If you or your loved one have to have that new pair of shoes or expensive gas grill now, there may be an important underlying reason.

Overspenders, says Yarrow, tend to feel neglected in some way. "Overspending is a guaranteed way to get attention," she explains. Plus, she adds, it's a classic example of passive aggression: "You can show 'em who's boss without a confrontation." Insecurity also tops Yarrow's list. She says people often use spending to bolster their self-esteem or sense of status.

"Couples really have to make a conscious decision to tackle the whole issue -- the whys behind the buys -- or the problem will keep re-occurring," she says. Here are her top tips for solving overspending problems in a relationship:

- Face it together: "Admit there is a problem," says Yarrow, "and commit lovingly to solving the problem."
- Analyze the triggers: "Agree on the psychological issues behind the spending and work out a plan to conquer those," she suggests.
- Make a plan: "Write out a spending plan and sign it," says Yarrow. "People really do keep promises longer when they're written."
- Get subliminal: Post reminders in spending-associated places, such as your wallet or computer, with helpful anti-spending messages. "A really good idea would be something like a love note like, 'With a love like ours, who needs new shoes?' rather than an admonishment: 'No shoes!'"

LifeWire provides original and syndicated lifestyle content to Web publishers. Sarah Jio's work has appeared in 'SELF,' 'Glamour,' 'Cooking Light' and many other publications.

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