

# Shrink Rap: Good and Plenty

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

Originally published in *Coast Magazine*, July 2005

Lisa, who is in her early 40s, strolls into my consulting room and announces she has affluenza. "It's the disease of striving to measure up to those who have more possessions than you and feeling like you've never got enough," she explains. She takes a deep breath to calm herself. "I think it might be a real disease. With actual symptoms."

"Do you have symptoms?"

"I get major hot flashes when I think about the new print satchel from Dolce and Gabbana! My mind starts spinning when I fantasize about the turquoise crocodile slides from Jimmy Choo! Do you think I'm neurotic for caring about these expensive things?"

And that begins our session on the meaning of "caring about expensive things." Here we are: living, working, and playing in the land of milk and honey.

As a result, our envy quotient is spilling off the charts - not to mention our desire to measure up in status, net worth, and physical appearance. Of course, we also care about appearances beyond the body. Besides enjoying our possessions, we expect them to create a favorable impression for others.

It goes without saying: We're living in a conspicuous consumption, see-and-be-seen fish-bowl where looking like you've got it is often as important as whether or not you really do. We're not in the don't-show-your-dough mid-West any more, Toto. When you cross the city line into Newport Beach, the welcome sign says "If you've got it, flaunt it - and if you don't, run to a plastic surgeon."

If you spend enough time here listening to what people care about, it's easy to end up believing that if you haven't got a boat (or at least a friend with one), expensive car, home in a "good" neighborhood, country club membership, a second vacation home or investment condo, your own home gym, and children with the kind of grades that will catapult them into the best colleges, something is drastically wrong with you.

## Working with your affluenza

Acknowledge and respect the difference between going into debt to buy things you want but can't afford just to have them now and knowing, through your hard work or good fortune, you can afford to indulge your desires. Not honoring this difference leads to big trouble.

Separate your possessions and the enjoyment they bring you from too heavily identifying with them. Resist the strong media-reinforced temptation to believe your identity is the sum-total of what you possess. This means you are not less valuable as a person than someone who has all the stuff that you wish you had. You're now thinking, "Yes, I know that." But you don't. You will still walk around hearing that voice in your head that whispers you would be just a bit happier if you had more.

Extravagant possessions are not the problem. Living the cultured and gracious life is not the problem. The lifestyle of the wealthy may be filled with fine things that enhance the quality of life, but these things become suffocating when they become more important than relationships.

Thirty years of working with people in psychotherapy has proven to me that people with all the stuff that would make your eyes pop out can be just as miserable as those who have little or nothing. And because their expectations are less, those without the stuff can find just as much joy.