

# Prevention Column

CONSUMERISM – JUNE 2020

## Consumerism: How it impacts our health

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In 2017, [93 million cars](#) were sold worldwide.

The average Canadian throws away [37 kg of used clothing](#) every year.



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# Consumerism: How it impacts our health

The latest smart phone, a bigger house with a double garage and a chef's kitchen, a car with ample room for all the family members, trendy clothing that you want to replace after a year or two... Several times a day, we are exposed to temptations that incite us to buy and consume. And many of us give in!

In a society that focuses on profit, money and things that are big, attractive and luxurious, having a lot of expensive things is often seen as a symbol of success. In this era of consumerism, with a drive for profit at all costs, are we happier and healthier? Nothing is less certain. A planet that does not produce more and that sees its resources being depleted more quickly than they can be regenerated, populations that are becoming poorer, social problems that are becoming more widespread, people who are stressed and suffering from its negative consequences... Consumerism, beyond a doubt, brings its share of problems and impacts our health. Fortunately, we can turn things around and adopt healthier habits. ■

## A consumerist society

According to studies, there are 300,000 items in the average American home. [The typical 10-year-old in Great Britain owns 238 toys](#) but plays with just 12 favourites. [Every second, 54 cell phones and three cars are sold worldwide](#). In 2017, global car sales reached 93 million. According to the [Recycling Council of Ontario](#), the average Canadian throws away 37 kg of used clothing annually, while **North Americans send 10 million tonnes of clothing**, to landfills every year.

These staggering figures eloquently illustrate our propensity to consume. Our society values things that are attractive, new, expensive and luxurious. It tires quickly of consumer goods. Money and the accumulation of material goods are seen as a way to impress others and elicit envy and admiration.

A prestige car, designer clothing and the latest tech gadgets are status symbols and sources of social worth. While some of us console ourselves when comparing these items with what we have, others feel pressure to maintain the same standard of living. ■

## CAN MONEY AND MATERIAL GOODS BUY HAPPINESS?

Studies have shown that our happiness is associated in part with our income. But does happiness increase in proportion to our means? Apparently not! After analyzing data from more than 1.7 million individuals from 164 countries, Purdue University researchers found that [the ideal income point was \\$95,000 USD for life evaluation](#) and \$60,000 to \$75,000 USD for emotional well-being. Beyond these thresholds, further increases in income did not necessarily lead to greater happiness.

So, the idea that making more money will make you happier seems to be more mirage than reality. Proof of this is that consumer debt has risen continuously over the years. The Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada has indicated that a two-percentage-point increase in interest rates on mortgage loans would oblige middle- or high-income households to adjust their budget and cut back on various expenses by 9 to 11% to have enough money for food, lodging, income tax and transportation.<sup>1</sup>

**In 20 years, consumer debt will have risen from 4.5 to 38%. That's over a 700% increase!** According to [Equifax](#), Canadians' average non-mortgage debt and delinquency has climbed to \$23,271. Those in the 36 to 45 age range have the highest debt level (nearly \$35,000), and those in the 56 to 65 age range have nearly \$30,000 in debt. Canadian households owed just over \$2 trillion in total at the end of 2017, according to the [Bank of Canada](#). This debt is like a dark cloud over our heads that could wreak havoc in the event of a financial crisis. ■

1. Camil BOUCHARD, *Réalisation de soi et surconsommation – Au Québec, les fourmis sont revenues cigales*, Le Devoir, May 17, 2010.





“IF EVERYONE IN THE WORLD HAD THE SAME CONSUMERISM PRACTICES AS CANADIANS, [...] WE WOULD NEED 4.7 PLANET EARTHS TO KEEP UP WITH DEMANDS.”

## EFFECTS on the health of our planet

According to [Global Footprint Network](#), in 2019, Earth Overshoot Day (the date on which humanity’s resource consumption for the year exceeds Earth’s capacity to regenerate those resources that year) was July 29. For the rest of the year after that date, we collectively began to use up the Earth’s biological capital. At this rate, [we would require 1.75 Earths to prevent an overshoot](#).

That’s not the worst. [If everyone in the world had the same consumerism practices as Canadians, overshoot day could be as early as March 18](#). To provide enough resources, we would need 4.7 Planet Earths. In other words, the unabated consumption is exerting immense pressure on our planet and using up the resources of future generations.

Pollution is among the consequences. [According to the UN](#), human activities have altered 75% of the land and two-thirds of the ocean. There is less biodiversity. Harmful substances are in the air we breathe and in the food we eat... ■

## What about personal balance?

In addition to the pressure of wanting to maintain the same lifestyle, there is the financial stress that stems from being in debt. It’s a known fact: Many Canadians live cheque to cheque, so maintaining a balance can be difficult. Job loss, medical leaves, significant unbudgeted expenses are all situations that can compromise a person’s financial – and mental – health.

### Signs of financial stress due to consumer debt:

- Arguments about money between spouses.
- Anxiety symptoms: insomnia, presenteeism, lower productivity at work, suicidal thoughts, etc.
- Physical health problems: headache, lower back pain and even cardiovascular disease.

But beyond financial issues, consumerism leads to other problems. The accumulation of goods results in our always needing more living space for storage. We live surrounded by clutter, which sometimes has a negative impact on our relationships. ■

## CHANGE CONSUMER HABITS: LIVE BETTER

**Good news!** You can turn things around and regain control over your consumer habits. There are various things you can do to achieve it.

- **Make a budget**, and jot down all your expenses, so you know where the money goes and how much you can spend. The more detailed your budget is, the more you know what you can cut, in case a problem arises.
- **Be mindful of your actions** with regard to money and credit. When you have easy access to all sorts of credit solutions, it’s hard to resist the temptation of compulsive shopping without much reflection and spending more than you can afford. Tip: Wait until the next day to make an unexpected purchase. Doing so enables you to put it into perspective and space out purchases. Ask yourself: Do I really need it? Is it really necessary?
- **Take the time** to shop around and compare your options before making a purchase. If you do, your purchase will be more meaningful and sustainable. Choose quality, longer lasting items as much as possible, avoiding those that are likely to go out of style or not stay good for long.
- **Reuse and recycle**: It’s also a good way to limit consumption. If you have clothing you’re tired of wearing, it’s better to donate it to a thrift shop or drop it off at a recycling depot than have it go to a landfill. ■

## In conclusion

There’s no secret: It’s a fact. Reducing consumption means making a conscious decision to have fewer items and to derive our feelings of self-worth from other values, such as solidarity, the quality of interpersonal relations, friends, family, etc. ■