

A closer look at Kleptomania

Stealing is considered a felony that is condemned by society. The justification of stealing usually involves the need for an item that cannot be afforded or the monetary value of the item itself. If one can afford to buy the item, does not need it, and the item has little to no value: Why would someone need to steal?

What is Kleptomania?

Kleptomania is a disorder characterized by an irresistible urge to steal items that have little value and are not really needed. Examples of stolen items could include paper clips, pens, pencils, flowers, or even utensils. It is considered a type of impulse control disorder in which the patient is unable to resist the act of stealing. People suffering from kleptomania do not steal for personal gain or with the intent to hurt the person they are stealing from. Kleptomaniacs steal in order to calm the anxiety, stress, and tension that they feel before stealing. The episode of stealing can be either followed by a sense of relief and gratification or by an opposite sense of guilt, dread, and self-loathing.

What causes the disorder?

The causes of kleptomania are not fully conclusive and known. Some research has linked kleptomania to a defect in a molecule that transfers a neurotransmitter called serotonin, which is a brain chemical that helps regulate moods and emotions. Low levels of serotonin can increase the risk of impulsive behaviors. Further, Kleptomania has been related to other addictive disorders where the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine is fairly common. The release of dopamine leads to the pleasurable feeling that people seek to feel over and over again. Other research has also linked Kleptomania to head trauma that can lead to low blood flow to the temporal lobe or even damage to circuits between the orbital and frontal lobes of the brain. Despite the various findings, more research is needed to better identify the causes behind kleptomania.

What are the risk factors?

Ironically, research shows that less than 5% of shoplifters have Kleptomania. The risk factors of Kleptomania are varied and may include family history, being a female, and having

another mental illness. Individuals that have a first-degree blood relative with kleptomania or obsessive-compulsive disorder are at a higher risk of Kleptomania. It is common for Kleptomaniacs to suffer from other mental disorders ranging from bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, eating disorders, substance abuse, to even personality disorders. Research shows that approximately two-thirds of Kleptomaniacs are women. Kleptomania often appears during adolescence and young adults, but rarely begins after the age of 50 years old.

What about treatment?

The embarrassment and fear of admitting to theft make seeking treatment a challenge. Kleptomania is considered a serious disorder that is difficult to overcome without appropriate treatment involving medications and psychotherapy. Various medications have shown to be effective in treating Kleptomania. After looking into the specific case and situation of the patient, the most common psychiatric prescriptions include: SSRIs, mood stabilizers, anti-seizure medications, and addiction medications.

Psychotherapy plays an essential role in the treatment of Kleptomania. Specific to Kleptomania, cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be the most effective therapy choice. CBT helps patients identify their maladaptive negative thoughts and behaviors and, in turn, replace them with adaptive and positive ones. Cognitive behavior therapists can use various techniques to help their patients such as covert sensitization, aversion therapy, and systematic desensitization. Covert sensitization involves allowing the patient to imagine that they stole and then having to face a negative consequence such as being caught. Aversion therapy includes associating mildly painful techniques, such as holding one's breath for an uncomfortably long time, with the urge to steal. Further, therapists use the systematic desensitization technique in order to help the patient practice relaxation techniques while picturing themselves controlling their urges to steal.

What can be done?

Relapses of Kleptomania are not unusual; therefore it is important to have a serious treatment plan. Psychoeducation regarding the risk factors, treatment, and triggering events that lead to stealing should be provided to patients. Kleptomaniacs should be taught how to identify the situations, thoughts, and feelings that are triggering the urges. Learning how to relax, stress

management, and finding healthy outlets can all aid patients in staying focused on their treatment goals.

The research needed to understand Kleptomania is not solid and complete enough to attempt preventing the disorder. However, ensuring that patients get the appropriate treatment as soon as the compulsive stealing is evident is very important in preventing the disorder from becoming a chronic condition that is challenging to overcome.