

The spiraling 'new-style dependency syndrome'

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Some people are addicted to drugs, others to alcohol. Just as some substances are potentially addictive, so are some behaviors: gambling, shoplifting, groping on trains, and so on. It's the thrill, the risk. Most addictions are unhealthy and antisocial. Others occupy a kind of gray zone. Take the man, for instance, who is addicted to cleaning his ears.

He's one of numerous exemplars of what Spa! (Oct 31) describes as a spiraling "new-style dependency syndrome." A thing starts out as a harmless diversion and is found to relieve stress and anxiety. It becomes compulsive. It can be just about anything: social gaming, shopping at Amazon, late-night anime, drinking soda water. Anything.

Our friend with the clean ear obsession is a 43-year-old salesman, pseudonymously named "Nakano-san." He's out all day meeting clients, and his success depends on their impression of him, which can make a person uncomfortably self-conscious about his or her appearance. How Nakano originally became fixated on his ears is not explained, but he goes around with three types of swabs – cotton, bamboo and metal – with which he continually pokes and prods his ears. "It calms me," he says. One psychiatrist the magazine speaks to likens it to a form of masturbation. Be that as it may, it's relatively innocent, as "dependencies" go – and yet not strictly harmless, for his ears are scabs all over, which should give him pause but apparently doesn't.

A certain "Yokota-san" is addicted to "likes" on social network sites. He likes to be liked. Maybe we all do. He's 36, and in securities. It's a demanding business, leaving him little time for making friends. But *renting* friends is a different matter. The going rate is 8,000 yen per

friend for two hours of friendship. Yokota rents three, four or five at a time, and takes them out to dinner at a swank restaurant. What for? For the photos, which he posts on Facebook and other such sites. What for? For the charge he gets as the number of “likes” rises. Why perfect strangers would “like” photos of people eating dinner is another question. The elegance of the fare? The conviviality of the company? Yokota’s salary is 300,000 yen a month, and such an expensive hobby is a considerable drain on it. He must think it’s worth it.

“Ishijima-san,” 39, is in IT, and his addiction is women encountered via “matching” apps on his smartphone. He lands one date a week – 50 or so altogether so far, six of which led to a hotel room. This is innocent enough, aside from the distraction he admits it causes him at work, and one other small detail: he’s married. He married young and inexperienced, causing him to wonder: “Could I maybe have done better?” He’s searching, it would seem, for the “better” woman he might have met had he not married so hastily.

Cleanliness obsesses some – the soda water drinker, for instance, a 43-year-old man who drinks almost nothing else, presumably in the interest of internal cleanliness. Others demand messiness, if not outright filth – in their surroundings, if not on their persons. “Yamada-san,” a 38-year-old office worker, is forever buying stuff he doesn’t need, the better to clutter his apartment. The more clutter the better. He was born into a poor family, he explains, and grew up with hardly any toys. The clutter symbolizes prosperity.

We’ll conclude with “Adachi-san,” 32, a temp employee. His peculiar “dependency” is arriving late. It’s cost him jobs, but he can’t break the habit. Arriving on time seems to him undignified. It suggests an unbecoming eagerness. Two possibilities are suggested: Either he thinks so little of himself that he can’t imagine his absence will make a difference, or else he craves reassurance that his absence *does* make a difference.

Anyone who laughs at all this might profitably do a little soul-searching – there to find, possibly, some hidden “dependency” that would qualify for Spa!’s next foray into the subject.

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