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## Even well-to-do women worry: 'Am I going to be a bag lady?': Half are afraid they'll go broke, survey finds

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They are more highly educated and financially independent than ever before, but a majority of women still feel insecure about money, and half of them fear ending up destitute on the street, a new study shows.

Dubbed "bag lady syndrome," the phobia was found to plague 46 per cent of women in a survey recently released by Allianz Life Insurance. The fear is not confined to those with limited financial means, either: Among women who earn more than \$100,000 U.S. a year, 48 per cent confessed to anxiety about running out of money.

"That's a very common comment. People come into my office -- women -- and say, 'So, am I going to be a bag lady?' They use that phrase," says Diane McCurdy, a certified financial planner in Vancouver and the author of *How Much Is Enough? Balancing Today's Needs with Tomorrow's Retirement Goals*.

A full 90 percent of women in the Women Money & Power Study said they felt financially insecure in some way, possibly explaining why they were twice as likely as men to have a secret stash of money that their spouse didn't know about. MSN MoneyCentral reported that the likes of Lily Tomlin, Gloria Steinem, Shirley MacLaine and Katie Couric have all owned up to moments of bag lady syndrome.

These fears are usually based on a warped perception of personal financial reality, Ms. McCurdy says, so she reassures her clients by working out "the hard numbers" that prove they will be fine. Women's median income has increased by 60 percent in the last three decades, while men's has remained stagnant, she says, but baby boomer women feel vulnerable because they grew up in a world where women didn't usually have the means to support themselves.

"Most of their mothers didn't work so they didn't really have role-models, but now today you're told that you'd better be able to take care of yourself," Ms. McCurdy says.

Though they suffer from "irrational fear" of financial ruin, people who are conservative with their money may actually benefit in the long run, says Jeff Harris, a chartered financial consultant in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and the author of *Retire Rich and Happy*.

There are clear differences in the way the two genders invest money, he says, and women often enjoy a more secure future because their investment decisions are shaped by a cautious outlook.

"Women, by and large, are content to earn a reasonable amount on their funds, whereas men have a tendency to be more aggressive and not recognize the danger they're putting themselves in if they mess up," he says.

Mr. Harris believes early life experiences in which there wasn't enough of anything can leave a legacy of worry, even after people have achieved impressive financial status. He sees it in an 80-year-old client who acquired a "huge nest egg" late in life with the sale of her family's farm, but who insists she'll retire from her home-based massage therapy business when she's 85.

It's the same leftover anxiety that preys upon Irina Paterson. The 47-year-old lives in Miami and enjoys a successful career as a balloon artist at upscale events across the country (under the auspices of The Russian Queen of Balloons), but growing up in deprivation in Russia left her with a lingering -- if irrational -- fear of never having enough.

"Mentally, I understand that it's a sick feeling and I'm wasting my time. I know it's stupid -- I'm trying to rehabilitate myself, as they say," she says, laughing.

Since she moved to the U.S. in 1992, Ms. Paterson has found herself hoarding financial savings, old shoes and clothing, broken electronics and a cellphone that doesn't even function in North America. She spends hours mending and fixing, even though she knows her time is worth more than the objects she's tinkering with.

In an effort to get over her bag lady fear and the pack-rat behaviour that accompanies it, Ms. Paterson registered for a website where users post information about unwanted objects to swap, and she found plenty of willing takers for her non-functioning television and tape recorders.