

The Washington Post

Heart Strings and Purse Strings:[FINAL Edition]

Richard Morin. [The Washington Post](#). Washington, D.C.: [May 16, 2004](#). pg. B.05

Feeling down or disgusted? Wait, don't buy or sell anything. And whatever you do, stay away from eBay or other online shopping sites until you cheer up.

That's because people tend to pay considerably more for an item when they're sad, claims psychologist **Jennifer S. Lerner** of Carnegie Mellon University. At the same time, she asserts, feelings of disgust can lead people to sell things at a lower price than they would otherwise.

It's not easy to simulate such real-world emotions and economic decisions, but here's the two-part process that **Lerner** and two Carnegie Mellon colleagues, Deborah A. Small and George Loewenstein, developed to do just that:

First, they asked 199 study participants (119 men and 80 women, most of them Carnegie Mellon students) to watch one of three movie clips. Test subjects sat alone at computer screens, and recorded their emotional states before, during and after viewing a four- minute segment.

A third of the sample watched a surrealistic scene from the movie "Trainspotting," which featured a longtime heroin addict's attempt to quit cold turkey and his dive into a filthy toilet to retrieve his "final hit" -- two opium suppositories. Yeew, that's disgusting, we agree.

A third saw a clip from the 1979 weeper "The Champ," in which a plucky towheaded lad faces the death of his well-meaning but sad- sack father. That was a downer.

A control group viewed a "neutral" clip -- tropical fish from a National Geographic film on the Great Barrier Reef.

Then, **Lerner** and her team asked the moviegoers to act as consumers. The researchers had already randomly assigned the study subjects to two groups. Members of one group were given a set of highlighter pens to keep, and then offered the opportunity to sell it. Members of the second group were not given the highlighters to start out; instead, they were shown the pens and asked to set a price they would be willing to pay to buy them. The participants then actually kept, sold or bought the highlighters, depending on the choices available to their group.

Each movie clip had the expected effect on its viewers, **Lerner** and her team found after reviewing the participants' written reactions. The dirty dive scene produced disgust, "The Champ" triggered sadness and the pretty fish produced no emotional reaction.

Then **Lerner** and her team analyzed the price data and found strong confirmation for what psychologists call the "endowment effect" -- the well-documented tendency of sellers to value objects more than buyers do. The participants who viewed the emotionally neutral fish scenes were willing to sell the highlighter set for an average of \$4.58, or a dollar more than buyers were willing to pay for it. Interesting, but no surprise.

What did surprise her, **Lerner** said, was the effect that the two emotion-producing clips had on buying and selling decisions. For example, feelings of disgust entirely wiped out the endowment effect: Buyers and sellers both valued the pens at slightly under \$3, **Lerner** and her colleagues reported in the latest issue of Psychological Science.

And for the sad group, the endowment effect was turned upside down -- the buyers were willing to pay far more for the pens (also \$4.58, on average) than sellers were willing to sell them for (\$3.06).

What's going on here? In **Lerner's** view, sadness sparks a need to change and expand our world; in this case, that translates into a desire to buy stuff. That's why people who shop or do other business online should think twice before getting on the computer when they're feeling sad, she said.

In contrast, disgust makes us want "to expel what we have" rather than acquire things, she asserted.

Lerner added that the huge impact of sad feelings occurred even though the researchers concluded that "The Champ" was a bit of a chump when it came to triggering the intended emotional response.

"The movie's too dated," **Lerner** said. "It produced a very mild level of sadness. It amazed us that we still got such a sizable effect; the effect should be much stronger in the real world."