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Sadness May Encourage More Extravagance

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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BOSTON (AP) -- If you're sad and shopping, watch your wallet: A new study shows people's spending judgment goes out the window when they're down, especially if they're a bit self-absorbed.

Study participants who watched a sadness-inducing video clip offered to pay nearly four times as much money to buy a water bottle than a group that watched an emotionally neutral clip.

The so-called "misery is not miserly" phenomenon is well-known to psychologists, advertisers and personal shoppers alike, and has been documented in a similar study in 2004.

The new study released Friday by researchers from four universities goes further, trying to answer whether temporary sadness alone can trigger spendthrift tendencies.

The study found a willingness to spend freely by sad people occurs mainly when their sadness triggers greater "self-focus." That response was measured by counting how frequently study participants used references to "I," "me," "my" and "myself" in writing an essay about how a sad situation such as the one portrayed in the video would affect them personally.

The brief video was about the death of a boy's mentor. Another group watched an emotionally neutral clip about the Great Barrier Reef, the vast coral reef system off Australia's coast.

On average, the group watching the sad video offered to pay nearly four times as much for a sporty-looking, insulated water bottle than the group watching the nature video, according to the study by researchers from Harvard, Carnegie Mellon, Stanford and Pittsburgh universities.

Thirty-three study subjects -- young adults who responded to an advertisement offering \$10 for participation -- were offered the chance to trade some of the \$10 to buy the bottle. The sad group offered to trade an average of \$2.11, compared with 56 cents for the neutral group.

Despite the big difference, participants in the sad group typically insisted that the video's emotional content didn't affect their willingness to spend more -- an incorrect assumption, said one of the study's co-authors.

"This is a phenomenon that occurs without awareness," Jennifer Lerner, a Harvard professor who studies emotion and decision making, said in a phone interview. "This is really different from the idea of retail therapy, where people are feeling negative and want to cheer themselves up by shopping. People have no idea this is going on."

The researchers concluded sadness can trigger a chain of emotions leading to extravagant tendencies. Sadness leads people to become more focused on themselves, causing the person to feel that they and their possessions are worth little. That feeling increases willingness to pay more -- presumably to feel better about themselves.

"Because the study used real commodities and real money, results hold implications for everyday decisions," according to the authors of the study, to be published in the journal *Psychological Science*, and presented Saturday at a meeting of the Society for Social and Personality Psychology.

Edward Charlesworth, a Houston-based clinical psychologist who was not involved in the study, suggested the misery-is-not-miserly phenomenon is rooted in a culture that encourages people to buy to feel better.

"Certainly, the advertising industry knows that," Charlesworth, citing as an example a 1970s [McDonald's](#) fast-food jingle, "You deserve a break today."

Charlesworth frequently sees clients in his clinical practice who overspend to deal with difficulties.

"It's not necessarily that you go to the mall and go on a shopping spree," said Charlesworth, author of a book on stress management. "It's often more subtle -- you spend a bit more on something than you normally would. But if you magnify that over the course of a year, or a lifetime, those little things add up."

Personal shoppers, who make a business of prowling the aisles for others, say they frequently see clients stray from their budgets when they're feeling blue.

"At that point, cost isn't usually a factor," said Kalyn Johnson, of New York City-based Style by Kalyn Johnson. "They say, 'If I can have these wonderful shoes, I'll look better, and feel better.'"

"But on the back end, I've seen buyer's remorse. This kicks in after they realize that new pair of shoes, or iPod, or whatever, didn't make them feel better, and then there's that sense of, 'Oh my God, why did I spend money on this?'"

The study released Friday was funded by grants from the [National Science Foundation](#) and National Institute of Health. Besides Lerner, the other study authors were Carnegie Mellon's Cynthia Cryder, Stanford's James Gross, and the [University of Pittsburgh's](#) Ronald Dahl.