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## Out of the bag: why sad people splurge



Scientists have unravelled a bit of the mechanics of retail therapy. A new study has shown that sadness prompts people to overspend, but only if they're focused on themselves.

The study by researchers in the US provides experimental evidence to demonstrate how fluctuating emotions influence day-to-day decisions on unrelated economic transactions. The researchers found that high levels of sadness and self-focus combine to increase spending. When self-focus is high, sad people spend more than people with neutral emotions.

Retail therapy unravelled

"The misery-is-not-miserly effect occurs only when self-focus is high," Jennifer Lerner, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, and her colleagues said in a report to be published in the journal *Psychological Science*.

"Sadness and self-focus influence individuals' actual buying prices."

Lerner and her colleagues at the Carnegie Mellon University and other institutions designed an elaborate experiment to examine how emotions influence the amount of money a person is willing to spend on a commodity.

Participants watched one of two video clips — the death of a boy's mentor in the movie *The Champ* or glimpses of Australia's Great Barrier Reef — and were given an option of buying a water bottle at various prices.

The volunteers who had seen the sad video clip offered nearly 300 per cent more to buy a product than the participants who had watched the neutral clip. However, the study also showed that when self-focus in a person was low, there was no relationship between sadness and spending patterns.

In the model proposed to account for overspending, a sad event and high self-focus causes a person to devalue the self and possessions. This self-devaluation triggers a desire to increase the valuation of possessions, and increases the willingness to pay more for new material goods to enhance the sense of the self. The study suggests that even fleeting, short spells of sadness can set off this chain of events.

"People have no idea that what they're feeling would influence their decision," said Cynthia Cryder, a doctoral student at the Carnegie Mellon and team member.

"Men and women have long been known to engage in retail therapy when they're feeling low," said Aruna Broota, professor of psychology at Delhi University, not connected with the study. "It's an attempt to restore loss of self-esteem. A sad event can lead to a devaluation of the self, but the acquisitions help restore value."

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

