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Shop 'til you smile

Study shows that sadness can make people more likely to open their wallets

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By Mark Jewell, The Associated Press

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 today 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," said Jennifer Lerner, a Harvard professor and former professor at Carnegie Mellon University who studies emotion and decision making.

"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 study was funded by grants from the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Health. Besides Lerner, the other study authors were the University of Pittsburgh's Ronald Dahl, Carnegie Mellon's Cynthia Cryder and Stanford's James Gross.

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 tomorrow 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," Mr. Charlesworth, citing as an example a 1970s McDonald's fast-food jingle, "You deserve a break today."

Mr. 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 Mr. 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."

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