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Spent: New research explores why sadness makes us splurge

by Jason Marsh, from Greater Good
March-April 2009



image by Jesse Kuhn

One day last spring, Harvard University psychologist Jennifer Lerner found out that a student of hers had suffered a relapse of a severe form of cancer. As she was walking home at the end of the day, she felt overcome by a wave of sadness.

But just beneath that sadness was another feeling, an urge that crept up on her as she was thinking about her student.

“I wanted to stop off at stores and buy things for my house,” she says. “It was so bizarre, but it was very hard to overcome—the urge to go shopping right then and there.”

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The urge may have seemed odd, but it's not uncommon. In fact, recent research has uncovered a strong connection between feelings of sadness and willingness to spend money on stuff—more money, in fact, than people would pay for the same stuff if they weren't sad.

In a study published in June 2008 in *Psychological Science*, Lerner and her colleagues gave participants \$10 and showed some of them a sad movie clip—a scene from the 1979 Ricky Schroder–Jon Voight tearjerker *The Champ*. The researchers asked those participants to describe how they'd feel if they found themselves in a situation like the one depicted. The rest of the participants watched a video about the Great Barrier Reef and wrote about their daily activities. Then all the participants were given the chance to buy a “sporty” water bottle.

The group that watched *The Champ* was willing to spend roughly four times as much for the bottle, \$2.11 as opposed to 56 cents.

The study, titled “Misery Is Not Miserly,” distinguishes itself from previous research into emotional spending by suggesting *why* sadness might induce splurging. The authors found that just feeling sad wasn't enough to affect people's spending habits. They also had to be experiencing what the authors call “self-focus,” a state that's often triggered by sadness. In the study, people were deemed high in self-focus if they frequently used *me*, *myself*, and *I* in their writing assignments. The authors hypothesize that the combination of sadness and self-focus makes people dwell on their shortcomings—on an unconscious level, they feel “devalued,” says Cynthia Cryder, a professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon and the study's lead author. In response, they have an *unconscious* desire to acquire things that they hope will increase their self-worth.

Whether it actually works—that is, whether spending effectively reduces feelings of sadness—is still undetermined. But even if it does, feeling better could come at a hefty price.

“The amount of money implicated is not trivial,” Lerner says. “This is not just an ‘Oh, isn't that interesting?’ finding. There are potentially massive implications.”

Americans currently spend 70 percent of their national income on consumer goods and services. Rates of consumer spending have increased steadily over the past 25 years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and consumer debt in the United States now tops \$2.5 trillion, according to the Federal Reserve Board.

Ronald Dahl, a coauthor on the “Misery Is Not Miserly” study, suggests that sadness could be easily exploited by marketers, especially because its effects can snowball.

“Imagine some advertiser has conveyed to you that getting certain products may make you feel better,” he says. “Then the bills come due and you don't feel better. You actually feel worse, because now you're further in debt. That sadness then makes you willing to pay more.”

Dahl, a professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh, speculates that this “negative spiral” originates in the cultural myth that buying things for oneself makes one happy. But he points to research, such as a study published in March 2008 in *Science*, showing that when people spend money on others, they feel happier than when they spend it on themselves.

Perhaps the best way to address the sadness-spending effect, Dahl says, is to teach people, from a young age, that the path to personal fulfillment lies in generosity and altruism. That way, the feelings of devaluation brought on by sadness might spur a desire to give to others, avoiding the downward spiral brought on by indulging oneself.

“It's basically a new pattern of thoughts, feelings, and actions together in the brain,” he says. “It means shifting away from self-focus toward being generous, giving to others—and discovering the rewards, in real emotional terms.”

Jason Marsh is editor in chief of Greater Good, a magazine about “the science of a meaningful life.” This article was excerpted from the Fall 2008 issue; www.greatergoodmag.org (<http://www.greatergoodmag.org/>).

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