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Experiences Bring More Joy Than Possessions Do

Buying an outing, like going to the beach, boosts well-being, study suggests

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MONDAY, Feb. 9 (HealthDay News) -- Although everyone knows that money can't buy happiness, purchasing life experiences instead of material possessions may increase your well-being, new research suggests.

 In a study that asked more than 150 older college students to rate a recent purchase intended to make them happy, researchers found that people were more satisfied with purchases of life experiences, such as a trip to the beach or for a meal.

There are likely a few reasons this is true, said study co-author Ryan Howell, an assistant professor of psychology at San Francisco State University. One may be that purchasing life experiences often brings someone closer to another person and satisfies a natural human need to be connected to others.

Another reason is that experiences provide "memory capital" that you can draw on in less happy times.

"Once you buy something, there's no reason to hold that memory," explained Howell. "But with a life experience, you can't take anything home. The only thing you can take with you

is a memory, and we tend to focus our memories on the intense emotion we felt during the experience or on how it ended. Memories have an inherent bias, and you remember the best parts of life experiences."

The findings were presented this weekend at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology annual meeting, in Tampa, Fla.

Howell's study included 154 students from San Francisco State University, average age 25. About one-third of the group was white, nearly one-quarter were Asian-American, 11 percent were multi-racial, 15 percent were Hispanic, and about 4 percent were black, Howell said.

The researchers asked each student to rate a recent purchase they made specifically with the intent of increasing their happiness. Half were told to write about a life experience purchase, while the other half was asked to write about a material purchase. Howell said they asked for purchases made with the intent of increasing happiness so they didn't end up comparing a trip to the beach purchase to a box of pencils.

The students reported feeling more alive and invigorated with the purchase of a life experience, said Howell.

The really good news from his study, given today's economic climate, is that life experience purchases don't have to be expensive to bring happiness, said Howell.

"A lot of the experiences were physical activities, like paying for park or beach admission," Howell noted.

However, Howell said that the findings probably don't apply to everyone. If you can't pay your mortgage, material things might increase your happiness more.

"As people drop closer to the poverty line, they tend to get more satisfaction with material things. The effect of purchasing life experiences probably becomes strong as you become more wealthy," he said.

"In this economy, being able to buy an item or an experience just for happiness is a luxury. I wonder for those who haven't had their basic needs met, if this would help as well?" said Katherine L. Muller, director of the cognitive behavior therapy program at Montefiore Medical Center and an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City.

"But if you do have disposable income, this could be something to consider, and you might want to make a conscious choice to try an experiential purchase," Muller said. "I think there's real value in the idea that memory is really the only thing you can take with you. And, social connectedness definitely creates more of an imprint, perhaps making the purchase more salient, because you shared it."

More information

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