

To feel happier, talk about experiences, not things

January 30 2013, by Susan Kelley

(Medical Xpress)—To get the biggest psychological bang for the buck, talk about your experiences, whether a hike in the woods or a trip to Rome, rather than your things, according to a new Cornell study.

Why? Because telling stories makes you enjoy the experience even more.

"People are more inclined to talk about their [experiences](#) than about their [material purchases](#), and they derive more [happiness](#) from doing so," said Amit Kumar, a graduate student in the field of psychology. Kumar and Thomas Gilovich, professor of psychology, presented their working paper Jan. 18 at the Society for [Personality](#) and [Social Psychology](#)'s annual meeting in New Orleans.

Talking about an experience facilitates the reliving of it, encourages embellishment—the more we talk about the time we climbed Mount Rainier the more fully we become "a mountain climber"—and fosters social connection, all of which enhance enjoyment of the original event, Kumar said. "We also found that taking away the ability to talk about experiences diminishes the enjoyment they bring and that the opportunity to talk about experiences increases the satisfaction they bring—but that's not true for material goods."

The work builds on Gilovich's previous research showing that buying experiences brings people more happiness than material purchases, such as a flat-screen television or high-end clothing.

In one of seven new experiments, the researchers asked 96 participants to recall either a significant experiential or material purchase. Then they asked the participants how much they had talked about the purchase and how much satisfaction they derived from it. Participants rated a higher satisfaction for experiences than for [possessions](#), because they were more likely to talk about the experiences with others.

In another experiment, the researchers measured what happens when people cannot talk about their purchases. They asked 98 participants to recall their two most significant experiential or material purchases in the past five years. Then they were asked to imagine that they could only have one of them: either their most significant purchase, but without being able to talk about it; or their second most significant one, with the freedom to discuss it. "[Participants](#) who recalled an experience were more likely to switch from a more significant purchase that they could not talk about to a lesser one that they could talk about, compared to those who recalled a possession," Kumar said.

The research has practical applications, Kumar said. For example, nursing homes could provide elderly residents with an opportunity to talk about their visits with relatives.

And marketers could increase how much enjoyment their customers derive from their products by highlighting the experiential elements and by giving customers the opportunity to create their own product narratives through review sites, online forums and "make-a-video" campaigns. Similarly, charitable organizations might effectively recruit and retain volunteers by highlighting the experiential elements of their activities and by giving volunteers an opportunity to talk about their experiences.

It may not be obvious that experiences bring people more happiness than material goods. After all, vacations last only a week or two, but iPads,

sweaters and vases last much longer, Kumar said.

"But psychologically, it's the reverse. Experiences live on in our memories and in the stories we tell, while our [material goods](#) 'disappear' as we inevitably get used to them," he said. "A once-cherished Walkman is now obsolete, but, as Humphrey Bogart once told Ingrid Bergman, 'We'll always have Paris.'"

Provided by Cornell University

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