

# Surprising connections between our well-being and giving, getting, and gratitude

January 19 2013

---

We all know that getting a good night's sleep is good for our general health and well-being. But new research is highlighting a more surprising benefit of good sleep: more feelings of gratitude for relationships.

"A [plethora](#) of research highlights the importance of getting a good night's [sleep](#) for physical and psychological well-being, yet in our society, people still seem to take pride in needing, and getting, little sleep," says Amie Gordon of the University of California, Berkeley. "And in the past, research has shown that gratitude promotes good sleep, but our research looks at the link in the other direction and, to our knowledge, is the first to show that everyday experiences of poor sleep are negatively associated with gratitude toward others – an important emotion that helps form and maintain close [social bonds](#)."

[Social psychologists](#) are increasingly finding that "prosocial" behavior – including expressing gratitude and giving to others – is key to our psychological well-being. Even how we choose to spend our money on purchases affects our health and happiness. And children develop specific ways to help others from a very young age. Gordon and other researchers will be presenting some of these latest findings at the Society for [Personality](#) and [Social Psychology](#) (SPSP) annual meeting today in New Orleans.

## Sleeping to feel grateful

A large body of research has documented that people who experience gratitude are happier and healthier. In three new studies, Gordon and Serena Chen, also of the the University of California, Berkeley, explored how poor sleep affects people's feelings of gratitude.

In the first study, people who experienced a poor night's sleep were less grateful after listing five things in life for which they were appreciative than were people who had slept well the night before. The researchers adapted the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, which measures sleep quality and number of hours slept, among other variables, to evaluate the previous night's sleep.

In the second study, participants recorded their sleep from the previous night for two weeks and their feelings of gratitude. The researchers found a decline in gratitude associated with poor sleep, and those participants reported feeling more selfish those days.

The final study looked at heterosexual couples and found that people tend to feel less grateful toward their romantic partners if either they or their partners generally sleep poorly. "In line with this finding, people reported feeling less appreciated by their partners if they or their partner tends to sleep poorly, suggesting that the lack of gratitude is transmitted to the partner," Gordon says.

"Poor sleep is not just experienced in isolation," Gordon says. "Instead, it influences our interactions with others, such as our ability to be grateful, a vital social emotion."

## **Giving away money to feel wealthy**

Just as expressing gratitude confers benefits, so too does giving to others. New research shows that people all around the world – from Canada to Uganda, from South Africa to India – derive more happiness from

spending money on others than they do on themselves.

"For the first time, we show that giving away money or spending it on others confers the ironic psychological benefit of increasing the giver's sense of wealth," says Michael Norton of Harvard Business School and co-author with Elizabeth Dunn of the University of British Columbia of the upcoming book *Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending*. In a suite of new, not-yet published, studies, Norton and colleagues showed that charitable giving makes people feel wealthier.

This research follows on other recent work published in *Psychological Science* by Norton and colleagues that shows that giving time to others – from helping with homework to shoveling a neighbors' driveway – actually makes people feel that they have more time. "In fact, giving time away alleviates people's sense of time famine even more than receiving unexpected windfalls of free time."

That people feel wealthier from spending money on others may explain why poor individuals tend to give away a higher fraction of their income than members of the middle class do. In one study, researchers reported that Americans earning less than \$20,000 a year give a higher percentage of their income to charity than others earning up to \$300,000 a year.

"Our results suggest when the poor give money away, that very act might mitigate their [feelings](#) of poverty," Norton says. "More broadly than this specific benefit, our investigation contributes to the growing body of research documenting the benefits of prosocial behavior, which include greater happiness, reduced mortality, and better immune function."

## **Buying experiences to feel happy**

In related research, psychologists are finding that spending money on experiential purchases, such as vacations, concerts, and meals out, tends

to bring us more happiness than material purchases, such as clothing, jewelry, or electronic gadgets. Amit Kumar and Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University are investigating one potential explanation for this difference: that experiences prompt storytelling more than possessions do.

In new research, they asked participants to recall either a significant experiential purchase or a significant material purchase. They then asked them how much they had talked about the purchase they recalled, and questions related to the satisfaction they derived from their purchase. Participants rated a higher satisfaction for experiences than for possessions, which was because they were more likely to talk about the experiences with other people.

In another experiment, the researchers measured what happens when people cannot talk about their purchases. They asked participants if they would be willing to pay a price to be able to talk about a beach vacation (experiential purchase) or an electronic good (material purchase).

"Participants were more likely to switch from a better purchase that they could not talk about to a lesser purchase that they could talk about in the experiential condition than in the material one," Kumar says.

"Well-being is likely to be enhanced by shifting the balance of spending in our consumer society away from material goods and towards experiential ones," Kumar says. "This research also suggests that there are benefits to be had not only by nudging people to choose experiences over possessions, but also by encouraging people to share stories about their experiences."

## **Knowing what is best to help others**

The roots for how we give to others form at a very young age. Children, it turns out, are very sophisticated givers – not only coming to someone's

aid when needed but also coming up with the best strategy for doing so, often independent of an adult's instruction.

In new research, Kristina Olson of Yale University and Alia Martin have found that children often will act, thinking they know better than others what is best for them or others. In a series of experiments, the researchers investigate whether 3-year-old children will help someone by ignoring the specific request and instead offering a better alternative.

In one study, for example, when an experimenter asks the child for a specific marker, but the child knows that marker does not work, the child will instead offer up a better marker. In another study, a pre-recorded child asks the child participant to give her a piece of chocolate via a tube that supposedly connects them. If the participant knows that chocolate makes the other child sick, the participant will decide to give her fruit snacks instead.

"Perhaps most provocatively, children will selectively decide not to help in this way if they don't like the person," Olson says. "For example, if an experimenter has previously been mean, children won't warn the adult of a potential harm – such as something sharp in the container they are reaching in – but will if the experimenter was not mean."

"These results suggest that children are able to help adults and peers already by the preschool years in rather complex ways, even when the beneficiary is misguided about what he or she wants," Olson says.

"Children don't just blindly do as they are requested, but rather consider a person's goal and consider alternative possible ways to achieve that goal."

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Surprising connections between our well-being and giving, getting, and gratitude (2013, January 19) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-01-well-being-gratitude.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.