

Research links sadness with avoidance of indulgent behavior

April 17 2014, by Milenko Martinovich

Getting the kids to go easy on the chocolate bunnies this year could be simple as sitting them down Easter morning and making them watch "Old Yeller."

University of Florida marketing professor Chris Janiszewski and co-researchers Anthony Salerno and Juliano Laran from the University of Miami found evidence to support that theory. In a study scheduled to appear in the June issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, "the researchers discovered that sadness "encourages people to identify behaviors that are potentially harmful to their long-term fitness."

Janiszewski and his colleagues investigated how emotions modify the behavior of people who plan to indulge. To create a desire to indulge, 120 [students](#) were asked to make a list of their favorite indulgent activities. A second group of 119 students was asked to list activities they performed on a typical day. These students were less likely to plan to indulge as a consequence of completing their task.

Then, each of group of students was asked to engage in one of four emotional activities: a sad task (they imagined breaking-up with a significant other), an angry task (they imagined having problems with their computer), a frightening task (they imagined being on a turbulent flight), or a neutral task (they imagined cleaning their apartment).

Afterward, the students watched a video on how to make origami while snacking on M&Ms. When the students had previously made a list of

activities performed on a typical day, students who experienced the negative emotions ate more M&Ms than the students that had engaged in the neutral task. This shows how a negative emotion encourages the consumption of comfort food. When the students had previously listed their favorite indulgent activities, the sad students ate fewer M&Ms than the students who did not experience an emotion or the students who were angry or afraid. This shows how sadness discourages the pursuit of indulgent activities by people who plan to indulge.

"Anytime you feel sad, you try to avoid pursuing goals that lead to outcomes that could induce further harm," Janiszewski said. During the pursuit of an indulgence goal, "...An experience of sadness should increase a person's sensitivity to the potentially harmful consequences of indulgent consumption, which, in turn, should decrease the desire to indulge."

One way the findings could be useful is in curbing indulgent behavior. For instance, public policy makers could encourage the airing of sad movies such as "Titanic" or "Marley and Me" in spring break party locations. This would be a way to encourage college students to be more responsible without directly asking them to restrict their behavior. While the researchers acknowledge "it would be naïve to suggest that policy makers should actively seek out ways to make citizens feel sad," feelings of sadness could prove to be valuable in situations that are characterized by indulgence.

Provided by University of Florida

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