

Feelings of gratitude increase the consumption of sweets

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Chocolate. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Gratitude is universally considered a social good—the warm feeling that results from a kindness received.

But [gratitude](#) can have a dark side; it can impel us to eat more [sweets](#), according to new research by Ann Schlosser, professor of marketing at the University of Washington Foster School of Business.

A research paper by Schlosser has been accepted by the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. Its title is "The Sweet Taste of Gratitude: Feeling Grateful Increases Choice and Consumption of Sweets."

"Gratitude has sweet side effects," Schlosser said. "This study finds evidence that feeling grateful for the helpful—or metaphorically

'sweet'—actions of others increases preference for and consumption of sweets."

And the more we feel connected to others, the more tempted we are to indulge in sweet things when we're in a state of appreciation.

Around the world, people use flavor classifications as easy metaphors for emotions. While salty, sour and bitter often evoke more negative connotations, sweet is almost universally associated with benefiting from the positive actions of another. Empathy. Generosity. Kindness.

But beyond the metaphorical connection, is there an actual connection between kindness and sweetness?

To find out, Schlosser designed a series of studies triggering [feelings](#) of gratitude and other emotions in participants, then measured their tendencies to select and consume sweet or savory indulgences, or nothing at all. Through different variations on this simple design, she found that gratitude elevates one's preference for sweets.

It does not, however, increase consumption of other kinds of foods. In fact, gratitude actually decreased preference for sour, salty or bitter foods.

"Because gratitude involves acknowledging benefits received from the kind—or metaphorically sweet—actions of another, individuals may infer that they must be deserving of sweetness," Schlosser said. "As a result, they prefer foods with a congruent [sweet taste](#)."

The study also demonstrates that the positive feeling of pride does not yield the same yearning for sweets as gratitude does because it does not carry the same "sweet" associations.

Another finding of the study is that the effect of gratitude on sweet preferences is strongest for those who feel connected to others. When feeling psychologically separate, Schlosser said, people value independence and tend to view others individually. When feeling psychologically connected, people see more similarities between themselves and others and view people more interdependently.

"Psychologically-connected individuals are typically more accepting of help and more likely to see themselves as playing a role in the kind act," Schlosser said. "When they feel gratitude, they feel like they deserve this kind act, this sweetness. Psychologically-separate individuals don't make as strong a gratitude connection."

The dangers of refined sugar have been well documented recently. Sugar is considered addictive, and its overconsumption contributes to obesity, [high blood pressure](#), high cholesterol and a litany of other diseases and disorders.

"Increased sugar consumption causes many serious health consequences," Schlosser said. "And prior research tells us that people are largely unaware of the factors that drive their consumption."

Schlosser, an Evert McCabe Faculty Fellow in the Foster School, noted that holidays can be times of temptation for overdoing it on sweets, in part because they are both occasions for gratitude and times when people feel connected to others.

"These are times when gratitude is being expressed and we're likely to be with a group and feeling especially interdependent," Schlosser said. "Being conscious of how these occasions might make you more likely to overconsume—especially sweet foods—can help you resist at least some of the temptation."

More information: "The Sweet Taste of Gratitude: Feeling Grateful Increases Choice and Consumption of Sweets," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Available online 4 March 2015, ISSN 1057-7408, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.02.006)

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