

# Why do people sacrifice short-term happiness for long-term welfare?

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Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

(Medical Xpress)—According to the hedonic principle, people are motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and, conversely, the avoidance of pain. Although there is a great deal of evidence to support this theory of motivation, both from psychological studies and everyday life, the theory does not explain why people often engage in activities that are unpleasant yet critical for their long-term welfare.

In other words, why do most [people](#) spend so much time working and doing housework when they could be engaging in [leisure activities](#)? And, perhaps more importantly, why do other people struggle to maintain steady employment and clean living conditions? The answers have a profound impact on the mental and physical health of individuals, as well as our survival as a species.

Working in the emerging field of computational social science, Maxime Taquet *et al.*, an interdisciplinary team of data scientists, physicians, and psychologists from the US, the UK, Belgium, and Spain, has gathered large amounts of data to help explain how humans sacrifice short-term happiness to maximize long-term welfare. By monitoring the moods and activities of 30,000 people for about a month using a smartphone application, the researchers discovered that a person's mood has a significant impact on what kinds of activities they decide to do.

Specifically, the data showed that when a person is in a good mood, they are more likely to do housework and other unpleasant yet useful activities over the next few hours than when they are in a [bad mood](#). When feeling bad, people tend to choose activities later that day that are more pleasurable, such as playing sports and spending time with friends, apparently in an effort to feel better.

The researchers explain that the results are interesting because they show that people do not always seek pleasure-enhancing activities, only at times when they're in a bad mood. This finding supports the "hedonic flexibility hypothesis" first proposed by Herbert Simon in the 1960s, which suggests that people have multiple goals, some short-term and some long-term, and a person's mood helps them prioritize among these goals in the same way that the current study has found. People who are in a bad mood tend to focus on improving their mood at that moment, whereas people in a [good mood](#) tend to think more about the future.

"Using this data, we showed that people are a lot more long-term-oriented than previously thought, truly 'managing' their mood through their choice of activities," coauthor Yves-Alexandre de Montjoye at the Imperial College London Data Science Institute told *Phys.org*. "This shows, using big data, how we humans routinely sacrifice our short-term happiness for our long-term welfare."

In future studies, the researchers want to examine the underlying mechanisms that explain exactly how mood influences a person's choice of activities. For example, a bad mood may be associated with people being tired or having difficulty concentrating, which indirectly affects people's decisions.

The research is published this week in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

**More information:** Maxime Taquet *et al.* "Hedonism and the choice of everyday activities." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. DOI: [10.1073/pnas.1519998113](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1519998113)

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