

# Q&A: Psychology professor discusses the neuroscience behind giving and receiving gifts

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The hustle and bustle of the holiday season is upon us and part of the holiday cheer revolves around exchanging gifts.

The acts of giving and receiving [gifts](#) encompass many emotions. Spending money on others [brings happiness to the gift-giver](#), studies say. In fact, psychologists have confirmed that the warm glow of kindness, [the feel-good rush after being kind to others, is real](#). A 2019 study says that [people who give benefit](#) regardless of whether they gain something from gifting others.

In this Q&A, Jessica Andrews-Hanna, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, in the College of Science, discusses in detail the psychology and neuroscience behind giving and receiving gifts.

## **Q: What happens to our brain when we gift others?**

A: There is a decent amount of research showing that the act of giving actually makes us feel better. Evidence from brain imaging also suggests that both giving gifts and receiving gifts activate core areas of our brain associated with reward and pleasure. These [brain regions](#) also stimulate the neurotransmitter dopamine.

All in all, psychology and neuroscience suggest that giving gifts to other people can be a very rewarding phenomenon that can bring happiness to ourselves and others. In order to maximize the benefits of gift giving, however, it will be important to take time to savor the act and not let the [holiday season](#) turn into a source of stress, as can sometimes happen when things get busy.

There is also a related area of research involving compassion that I think nicely intersects with giving gifts.

## **Q: How exactly is being compassionate related to giving gifts?**

A: When we feel compassionate toward another person, we are often motivated to do something nice for that person, such as to help them relieve their suffering. There is a growing body of research suggesting that feeling close to someone, or caring deeply for them, involves considering this person as part of ourselves, and enhances our willingness to engage in an act of kindness for that person. And vice versa, when we do something nice for another person, we feel closer to that person as a result.

What this all means is that when we are kind to others, we are, in a way, being kind to ourselves. There is a psychological term called "vicarious reward" that suggests that when we witness something positive happening to another person, we vicariously feel in that person's pleasure, too. We can capitalize on this phenomenon by making ourselves happy by doing [good deeds](#) for others, including by giving gifts.

We all know people who exemplify what it means to live a life of compassion. Some people have spent thousands of hours training in a kind of meditation called "compassion meditation" or "loving kindness meditation," which involves sending love, kindness and warm thoughts to others. When these compassion experts send thoughts of love to other people, their brain lights up with dopamine and they feel happy. The good news is that we can all train ourselves to become more compassionate. In fact, the University of Arizona has a Center for Compassion Studies that offers regular workshops on this topic.

## **Q: What happens when we see someone open our gift?**

A: This is an understudied area in psychology and neuroscience. We give gifts to other people because we expect that our gifts will bring others happiness. In this sense, we would presumably derive the most personal pleasure if we knew that our gifts were well received. Giving the perfect

gift involves a process called perspective-taking, where we might mentally put ourselves in another person's shoes and imagine what would bring us happiness if we were that person.

Perspective-taking is a kind of empathy often referred to as "cognitive empathy," and is considered a key ingredient of compassion. Ultimately, however, regardless of whether or not people receive the perfect gift, many people just like to know that they are on your mind. In many cases, it's the thought that counts.

**Q: We often come across the term 'warm glow of giving.' Can you elaborate on that?**

A: The "warm glow of giving" is a theory that suggests that when we give something to others, it leaves a warm fuzzy feeling in ourselves that persists over time and creates a glow of kindness about us. We can create this warm glow not just by giving physical gifts, but by engaging in other acts of kindness like complimenting others and telling others how much they mean to us.

This process can also extend beyond the giver and recipient; when we do something nice for another person, the other person may be more apt to pay it forward. I think today's society would especially benefit from experiencing more of a warm glow this holiday season. This warm glow could help combat the rise in interpersonal conflict and mental health challenges. A big dose of [kindness](#) would help bring people closer together and spread more happiness around.

Provided by University of Arizona

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