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This Is Your Brain at the Mall: Why Shopping Makes You Feel So Good

By TARA PARKER-POPE

When Wazhma Samizay and her friends have a bad day, they go shopping, a ritual dubbed "retail therapy."

"When you are shopping to buy a gift or get something for yourself, either way it's kind of a treat," says Ms. Samizay, who three years ago opened a Seattle boutique named Retail Therapy. "The concept of the store was about finding things that made people feel good."

Science is now discovering what Ms. Samizay and many consumers have known all along: Shopping makes you feel good. A growing body of brain research shows how shopping activates key areas of the brain, boosting our mood and making us feel better -- at least for a little while. Peering into a decorated holiday window or finding a hard-to-find toy appears to tap into the brain's reward center, triggering the release of brain chemicals that give you a "shopping high." Understanding the way your brain responds to shopping can help you make sense of the highs and lows of holiday shopping, avoid buyer's remorse and lower your risk for overspending.

Health Mailbox



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Much of the joy of holiday shopping can be traced to the brain chemical dopamine. Dopamine plays a crucial role in our mental and physical health. The brains of people with Parkinson's disease, for instance, contain almost no dopamine. Dopamine also plays a role in drug use and other addictive behaviors. Dopamine is associated with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, and it's released when we experience something new, exciting or challenging. And for many people, shopping is all those things.

"You're seeing things you haven't seen; you're trying on clothes you haven't tried on before," says Gregory Berns, an Emory University neuroscientist and author of "Satisfaction: The Science of Finding True Fulfillment."

University of Kentucky researchers in 1995 studied rats exploring unfamiliar compartments in their cages -- the laboratory equivalent of discovering a new store at the mall. When a rat explored a new place, dopamine surged in its brain's reward center. The study offers a warning about

shopping in new stores or while out of town. People tend to make more extraneous purchases when they shop outside their own communities, says Indiana University professor Ruth Eng, who studies shopping addiction.

But MRI studies of brain activity suggest that surges in dopamine levels are linked much more with anticipation of an experience rather than the actual experience -- which may explain why people get so much pleasure out of window-shopping or hunting for bargains.

Dopamine can cause someone to get caught up in the shopping moment and make bad decisions. Dr. Berns of Emory says dopamine may help explain why someone buys shoes they never wear. "You see the shoes and get this burst of dopamine," says Dr. Berns. Dopamine, he says, "motivates you to seal the deal and buy them. It's like a fuel injector for action, but once they're bought it's almost a let down."

Dr. Berns and his colleagues have devised studies to simulate novel experiences to better understand when and why the brain releases dopamine. In one set of studies volunteers reclined in an MRI scanner while a tube trickled drops of water or sweet Kool-Aid into their mouths. Sometimes the Kool-Aid drops were a predictable pattern, while other studies used random drops. Notably, when the Kool-Aid was predictable the brain showed little increased activity. But the scans showed a high level of activity when the Kool-Aid was given at random. This indicates that the anticipation of the reward -- whether it's Kool-Aid or a new dress -- is what gets our dopamine pumping.



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Because the shopping experience can't be replicated inside an MRI scanner, other researchers are using electroencephalogram, or EEG, monitors that measure electrical activity in the brain to better understand consumer-shopping habits. Britain's Neuroco, a London consulting firm, uses portable monitors, strapped on to shoppers, to produce "brain maps" as a way to understand consumer buying habits. The brain maps show a marked difference in the brain patterns of someone just browsing compared with a consumer about to make a purchase.

"Shopping is enormously rewarding to us," says David Lewis, a neuroscientist and director of research and development. But Dr. Lewis also notes that stressful holiday crowds, poor service or the realization that you've spent too much can quickly eliminate the feel-good effects of shopping.

Knowing that shopping triggers real changes in our brain can help you make better shopping decisions and not overspend while in a dopamine-induced high. For instance, walking away from a purchase you want and returning the next day will eliminate the novelty of the situation and help you make a more clear-headed decision.

Dr. Eng of Indiana has compiled a list of dos and don'ts to help people make better shopping decisions. Although the steps are aimed at people with compulsive shopping problems, they are useful for anyone caught up in the holiday shopping frenzy.

Buy only the items on your shopping list to avoid impulse purchases.

Use cash or debit cards. Financial limits keep you from buying things you can't afford in the midst

of shopping excitement.

Window-shop after stores have closed or when you've left your wallet at home. You'll get the pleasure of shopping without the risk of overspending.

Don't shop when you're visiting friends or relatives. The added novelty of shopping in a new place puts you at higher risk of buying something you don't need.

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