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Why Brooding Shoppers Overpay

By JOHN TIERNEY

When you're depressed, you tend to devalue things around you. But then why are you more inclined to hit the mall and buy stuff at higher prices than you would at other times? A new [paper](#) to be published in *Psychological Science* provides an answer to that question — and support for a theory of the self proposed by William James more than a century ago.

The research team, led by Cynthia Cryder of Carnegie Mellon University, asked experimental subjects how much they'd be willing to pay for a "sporty, insulated water bottle" — which I realize may not be your idea of a mood-lifting purchase. But something in it seemed to hold special appeal to some of the subjects who'd been put in a gloomy mood by watching a sad video clip about the death of a boy's mentor (as opposed to a video clip about the Great Barrier Reef, which was shown to a control group). The sad subjects on the whole offered higher prices for the water bottle than did the control group.

But it wasn't just their sadness that explained their shopping spree. The ones who paid the higher prices were the ones who saw the sad video and were also the most self-focused. The researchers explain this by quoting William James, the 19th century American psychologist, who theorized that our attachment to our material possessions is so strong that losing them causes "a sense of shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness." So when you're feeling blue and focused on yourself, you're more eager to go shopping and spend whatever it takes to make yourself whole again: I have stuff, therefore I am.

I asked one of the authors of the paper, Jennifer Lerner of Harvard, what lessons we shoppers could learn from this experiment. Here's her answer:

1) Although it is tempting for all of us to believe that emotions affect only "other, less experienced" decision makers, the data contradict this belief. In our studies, we have people from elite universities who are trained in quantitative analysis serve as subjects and they still show that emotions from the past carry over to present, simple economic decisions. 2) Because the price one pays for something can vary dramatically (300% in our studies) as a function of transient emotional states, and because most people do not recognize this variation, it is important to evaluate price and then re-evaluate it at a different point in time. 3) Now that the mechanism driving the variation is known, interventions can be designed. For example, decision makers can attempt to reduce self focus by placing their attention on others. 4) Another tempting belief is that one's mood (positive vs. negative), if it matters at all, would necessarily influence decisions in a mood-congruent way. So, many might suspect that being in a negative mood like sadness would trigger a negative outlook, encouraging devaluation. Here, again, the data contradict this belief. Sadness is a negative state but it does not trigger a negative outlook; instead it triggers increased valuation of commodities. People pay more to get things when they are sad.

Here's my bottom line: Stay away from the mall and car showrooms when you're feeling gloomy and self-obsessed. Or at least let someone else do the price-haggling for you.

Can you think of any time you overspent just because of your mood? Did the stuff make you any happier? And can you think of any merchants or advertisers who are particularly good at taking advantage of this foible?