

Gift-Giving Better Than Give-Receiving?

Lee Kwan Yui Megan

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Christmas is around the corner and people are already starting to plan out for their Christmas gifts ideas. With all the holiday shopping vibes spreading around, I started to think about what I got for Christmas last year and what I gave in return. By recalling my own experiences and stories told by my friends, I realized that we often found ourselves not only struggling with the idea of finding gifts, but also in accepting gifts. Have you ever felt stressed when receiving an expensive gift because you did not know what to give in return? Have you ever felt uncomfortable receiving a gift because you worried that it may come with strings attached? And have you ever felt unworthy or that you do not deserve to have any gifts? Some people often find receiving is more difficult than giving, and let us find out why.

Why is giving better?

Promotes Happiness and Satisfaction

“Giving is better than receiving because giving starts the receiving process” quoted by Jim Rohn. There are countless ways to give and people show generosity from donating money or items to charity to giving thoughtful gifts to the ones we loved. Empirical research done by Harvard Business School found that altruistic behavior such as gift-giving and charitable giving can promote happiness and well-being (Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). Their studies examined the association between happiness level and prosocial expenditures. Results indicated people who spent more on buying gifts for others and donations to charities were associated with higher levels of happiness, whereas people who spent more on paying bills/expenses and buying gifts for themselves had nothing to do with happiness (Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). Besides, they also found that how people spend their money is more important than how much money they have spent.

Furthermore, according to self-determination theory, 3 components are fundamental for basic human needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness, which are important for psychological well-being and intrinsic motivation. Autonomy refers to people feel like they are in control of choices and make informed decisions. A sense of volition and self-governing of thoughts and behavior. Competence is the ability to master over tasks and apply knowledge to lists of skills and abilities. People gain confidence when they achieve their desired goals. Relatedness means the need to have meaningful relationships with others. Being socially connected with others around them. A study has found that prosocial spending promotes greater happiness when people meet all the 3 needs (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014). The benefits of prosocial spending are greater when an individual feels that their decision to give gifts is controllable, is effective and will have an impact on people whom they are socially connected with (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2014).

Will happiness encourage people to engage in future prosocial spending? The answer is yes. The relationship between prosocial spending and happiness is bidirectional (Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2011). Prosocial spending promotes happiness and this happiness increases the individual's long-term prosocial expenditure. Thus, Harvard Business School's study also found that asking participants to recall the memory they spent on buying gifts for others evokes happiness, which in turn encourages them to continue to engage in prosocial consumer behavior in the future (Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn, 2009). Therefore, people are more likely to derive happiness and satisfaction when buying gifts for others.

Health Benefits

Perhaps most of us believe that spending money on ourselves is the ultimate way to make us happier and healthier. However, spending money on others can maximize our health because

it makes us feel we are socially connected. Prosocial spending can lower your blood pressure and improve your physical health. Research done by the University of British Columbia found that prosocial spending can lower blood pressure among older adults diagnosed with hypertension (Whillans, Dunn, Sandstrom, Dickerson, & Madden, 2016). Reducing systolic and diastolic blood pressure helps improve cardiovascular health. Besides, prosocial spending can foster subjective well-being by reducing psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depression (Miles, Andiappan, Upenieks, & Orfanidis, 2021). A recent study also suggested that providing social support can reduce stressful behavior and it serves as an effective coping strategy on a daily basis (Aknin, & Hanniball, 2017).

Enhance Social Connections

Giving gifts plays an important role in strengthening interpersonal relationships. The gifts we chose are associated with psychological distancing. A study found that giving gifts that are easy to use but of lower quality, can lead to a sense of psychological intimacy between the giver and receiver. (Rim, Min, Liu, Chartrand, & Trope, 2018). Let the receiver know you have put in the effort and time to choose the perfect gift for him/her, which will make them feel special. The act of giving is rewarding because it is a process of love and shows your sincerity. A gift conveys a thousand words and it is a form of emotional expression. Giving to others will not take away what you have but will in fact add to your life.

Why is receiving harder?

Gift guilt

When it comes to gift-giving, people often worry that the gift they are giving is not equal to the value of the gift that they are receiving. Gift guilt also occurs when people have nothing to give back when they receive the gifts or when they have no intention of buying one. Two

underlying psychological theories help explain the phenomenon of gift guilt: Adam's Equity Theory and Expectancy Theory.

According to the American Psychological Association, equity theory posits that people yearn for a fair and balanced relationship. Fairness is based on the notion that the time and energy that a person invests into a relationship, he or she will expect this effort to be rewarded. When there is an imbalance or negligence in a relationship, people attempt to restore the equilibrium of that relationship. Equity can be measured by the number of gifts, as well as the amount, time and effort to obtain a gift (Manikowske, & Winakor, 1994). People may feel guilty when they perceive an imbalance between what they receive and what the other person gives. Expectancy theory refers to people choose to behave in a certain way because they believe their actions will bring desired outcomes and rewards (Andrade, & Barros, 2019). For example, when a giver gives a costly gift, he or she will assume the recipient will reciprocate with an expensive gift in return. Gift guilt arises when people are not prepared in return for a gift of equal value.

A Sense of Burden

Gift-giving is important in interpersonal communication because it fosters connections. When someone spends their time and money to buy gifts for ourselves, we sometimes feel grateful. However, this gratitude might feel like a burden rather than a gift when we don't actually need or like it. There are some false beliefs about acceptance : in order to get something, we must work hard to earn it; we must be independent and not be needy. Some may think they are not worthy of this gift because they have the feeling of "I haven't done enough for them" and yet they are showering you with affection and love. People feel burdened not because of the gift itself but the affection behind it.

Avoid power-relations

On the other hand, gifting can be a symbol of power. Sometimes people give gifts to ensure their social status and rank in the social structures. Gifts can be symbolized as obligations and responsibilities. It serves multiple purposes: pleasing the recipient, connecting a larger social network, signaling commitment, trust building and fulfilling social norms (Andrade, & Barros, 2019). The stress of reciprocating giving occurs when people worry their gifts in return might lack the perceived quality or quantity and hence, lose their social status. We expect reciprocate giving is based on social norms and it can be demanding when this behavior becomes an assessment.

Ways to Overcome

Giving is an act of love and can lead to happiness. Gift-giving reflects gratitude and consideration of the giver to the recipient. However, people believe that gift-receiving is harder than gift-giving because of the reasons mentioned above. Therefore, there are ways to overcome the feeling of gift guilt. To begin with, avoid overthinking by understanding the intention behind the gift. Knowing the story behind the gift can help us avoid misunderstandings and graciously accept the gift without hesitation. Accept the fact that you are worthy of this love. Besides, appreciate it and feel its warmth rather than focus on the gift itself (Dwyer, 2021). Try to change your focus by thinking that the person *wants* to give the gift to you, instead of he or she is devoting their time and effort to you (Dwyer, 2021). This may make you feel less stressed when receiving the gift. In addition, a gift is never meant to be carrying any obligations or requirements. It is important to remind yourself not to stress too much about finding the “perfect” gift defined by social norms. Gifts create balance. The intention of reciprocate giving is about exchanging unequal values and the power of reciprocate giving is all about love and care. It does not matter when your friends give you a costly gift and you give them their favorite

homemade dessert in return. Lastly, thank them sincerely for thinking and caring about you.

Everyone deserves to be loved and we are allowed to receive care and respect from others. It is common to feel uncomfortable when receiving gifts so let's find ways to reduce this stress and be grateful for the gift you received.

Creating a Harmony

Gift giving and gift receiving is equally important in human interaction and hence one cannot happen without the other. In every aspect of relationships, they are established on a constant exchange of giving and receiving. Giving feels good because we feel like we are the first to invest and put the effort into the relationship and have influence over the recipient, whilst acceptance is more difficult and challenging because we feel burdened and guilty when we accept the gift and we have to give back in return. However, being able to receive with an open heart can lead to a more nurturing and satisfying relationship. Giving and receiving are complementary in our lives and it is essential to seek a balanced "give-and-take" relationship. Learning to balance is important for developing a healthy relationship, as well as overall well-being. Starting with simple giving: from a hug to a thoughtful gift, and the receiving can be as simple as saying "thank you". Through continuous practice of giving and receiving you will be able to deepen your relationship and bring happiness to you and your loved ones.

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