

How Gift-Giving Impacts Mental Health, Emotions and the Brain

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Prosocial Spending, Happiness and Mental Health

The happiness you see on your giftee's face during a gift exchange goes beyond the surface level. Their smile is more than just a meaningless symbol to represent happiness, joy and acceptance. Rather, gift-giving for both the gift giver and the gift recipient has a much deeper effect on mental health, psychological and physical well-being, emotions and the brain's connections! Gifting is a form of prosocial behaviour that may help safeguard mental health in the long term. Prosocial behaviour is indicated by acts between two individuals that help each other, such as, gift-giving. Prosocial behaviour as such is important to support and protect mental health and boost emotional well-being (Miles et al., 2021).. Spending money on others, more commonly known as prosocial spending can lead to greater levels of happiness in comparison to spending that money on yourself (Dunn et al., 2008). [Studies](#) show that prosocial spending for a stranger as opposed to spending on oneself results in greater momentary happiness (Dunn et al., 2008). Similarly, in [previous research](#) done on Canadian and South African students revealed that students who purchased and gave away candy for sick children in a local hospital rather than themselves reported to be happier, regardless of having to spend their own money (Aknin et al., 2015).

Gift exchange has a high social value and is the primary context of social relationships. There are two categories of gifts; experiential and material. Experiential gifts are gifts in which an individual acquires a life experience, whereas, a material gift is the giving of a material good (Balconi et al., 2019). In comparison to material gift exchange, experiential gift exchange can increase individual satisfaction, increase social connections and can strengthen interpersonal relationships (Balconi et al., 2019). However, the gifts that support mental health do not have to pertain to a specific category. Gift exchange is shown to increase social well-being for both the

gift giver and gift recipient despite the size of the gift itself (Balconi et al., 2019). According to [past research](#), gratitude is increased after gift exchange, and after receiving a gift, the giftee is pushed through reward systems to repay the gift-giver, and in turn this individual positively influences their performance as well. In addition to strengthening and developing social relationships, the cooperative attitudes that constitute gifting behaviours helps implement social inclusion, therefore, boosting mental health.

A [cross-cultural study](#) done on prosocial spending revealed that despite levels of income, rich and poor countries alike, manifested greater levels of happiness when spending and giving to others (Aknin et al., 2013). Even during a randomly assigned charity task, participants had greater levels of positive affect in comparison to individuals who bought the same items for themselves (Aknin et al., 2013). North American students who participate in prosocial spending in the form of gifts and charities, often have greater levels of well being despite their income (Aknin et al., 2013).

The Effects of Charitable Gifting on Mental Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic put a halt on the lives of many around the world. COVID-19 affected not only affected jobs, and social interactions, but created or exacerbated mental health issues such as depression from the increased isolation, or anxiety from the germs scare, sick family, or severity of the disease. Consequently, the pandemic has resulted in a severe impact on mental health worldwide. A [study](#) done on the charitable gifting of COVID-19-related and COVID-19-unrelated items showed higher levels of empathy and positive affect (Varma et al., 2022). Prosocial spending, generosity and gift-giving during the pandemic had a positive psychological effect and increased well-being despite the difficult times.

How Gift-Giving and Gift-Receiving Affects Brain Connectivity

Not only does gift-giving and gift receiving have positive effects on the psychological aspects of mental health and emotions, but the effects also go beyond this to the neurobiological roots of emotion. The functioning of the brain itself, its connections, signalling pathways, and neurotransmitters are all affected by the act of gift-giving and receiving. This is not only limited to the enhancement of emotions, rather the act of sharing gifts may also positively affect self-efficacy, the perception of cognitive abilities, and social interactions (Balconi et al., 2019).

The effects of gifting have been extensively researched using a neurological perspective. Neuroimaging scans have shown certain areas of the brain involved in the cognitive, behavioural and emotional areas of social interactions (Balconi et al., 2019). The reward system of the brain is involved when an individual performs a prosocial behaviour such as gifting. A [study](#) done on the brain performance during the interpersonal exchange of gifts found that there is improved behavioural performance of brain activity after gift exchange (Balconi et al., 2019). Results showed that when gifts are exchanged, there is an increase in accuracy and decreased response time in inter-brain functional connectivity (Balconi et al., 2019). Greater levels of interpersonal engagement, like those involved in gift-giving, can help with the coordination of behavioural activities.

In terms of the neurobiology behind gift exchanges, there is more cortical activation of the gift giver, when compared to the receiver in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and premotor cortex (DPMC) (Balconi et al., 2019). The DLPFC and DPMC areas of the brain represent visuomotor performance and social strategy respectively. This in turn implies that gift exchange for both the gifter and recipient has a more active role in prosocial behaviour when the DLPFC is activated due to the emotional engagement and empathic mechanisms taking place

during the exchange (Balconi et al., 2019). This neurophysiological connection is important in the context of gift-giving as previous research shows that the DLPFC area is also important in prosocial and social processes of exchange, and help suppress selfish behaviour and create social reinforcement and help create meaningful and strong relationships (Balconi et al., 2019).

Another [study](#) examined how brain activity and behavioural performance improved after gift exchange. Results showed that the act of giving always had a positive effect on gratitude and improved interpersonal bonds and behavioural performance (Balconi et al., 2020). Gift exchange also resulted in a greater activation of delta and theta bands in the DLPFC, correlating to the increased positive emotions and motivation associated from gift-exchange (Balconi et al., 2020).

Important Takeaways

Although gift-giving may seem rather stressful for the gift giver and in some cases the receiver as well, the overall positive impact of gifting is far greater. According to [evidence-based research](#), when we spend on others and give gifts, this promotes our happiness and mental health. Even giving small gifts to others from time to time may provide small boosts of happiness and greater well-being. Gifts to boost mental health do not require loads of money. They can really just be simple gestures of love. Gifts of emotion and shared experiences with another individual are the ones that are proven to be most effective on mental health. Even charitable giving is one of the top predictors of life satisfaction worldwide (Dunn et al., 2008). In comparison to spending on oneself, prosocial spending on gifts and charities results in overall states of greater well-being and happiness among many cultures worldwide and is not limited by income (Aknin et al., 2013). Not only does all this take effect on the surface level, but there are neurological connections to the benefits of gift-giving behaviour as well. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and premotor cortex (DPMC) both show signs of increased activity, which promote

healthy relationships, emotions, well-being and prevent selfish acts (Balconi et al., 2019).

Overall, gift-giving is important to develop relationships and promote mental and physical health.

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