

The Science Behind Giving

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Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. discusses the physiological effects of giving.



As Christmas nears, the old adage—"It's better to give than receive"—enters many people's minds. Why do some people give more than others? Where did this old saying come from? The idea that giving is indeed better than receiving makes a lot more sense if you conceptualize giving from a physiological and biochemical, religious and even evolutionary perspective. In essence, there is a scientific rationale for why giving truly does feel better than receiving.

The act of giving produces varying degrees of euphoria and a sense of well-being. The feelings are very similar to the high associated with using drugs or having sex, albeit with less intensity. This is true both from the subjective perception of people and objectively when measured by functional brain imaging. Studies show the "pleasure center" of the brain, called the nucleus accumbens, is strongly activated by giving to others. The activation of this brain area is flooded with dopamine, which is exactly what happens with drugs or sex.

In fact, some people are born with a stronger desire to give than others. Genetic differences associated with biochemical properties of the nucleus accumbens' reward circuitry influence the motivation to be a giver. Certain genes enable some people to experience more pleasure from the act of giving by increasing the sensitivities of these reward pathways. These people are much more likely to be givers than people without the specific gene configuration.

The ability to give also can be explained from an evolutionary perspective. From birth, mothers nurture and essentially "give" to their baby by feeding and caring for them. The closer the mother-infant bond is, the more likely the baby will develop normally. Normal emotional and physical development are key to all species from the perspective of evolutionary fitness.

Even from a medical perspective, a wide range of illnesses like multiple sclerosis, as well as psychiatric illnesses including severe depression, can drastically improve when giving becomes part of life. In addition to the biochemical pathways involved in healing illness, the fact that giving focuses the mind on others rather than yourself also contributes to the power of its healing.

Various religions also deem giving of key importance. For example, the Buddhist teaching of the Ten Perfections lists giving as No. 1. Christianity also promotes the act of giving throughout the bible.

So during this holiday season, consider that there are even more reasons to reach out and give gifts, time or love to others. It will not only bring them joy but will focus your mind away from your own problems and will physiologically make you feel great.

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