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Why giving the right Christmas present can make you feel good – there's a science behind it

Experiments show the 'joy of giving' has a biological basis in the brain, with altruism hard-wired in humans to give a pleasurable sensation

People's happiness is greater when they spend more on others

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Anthea Rowan

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You know that deep, warm feeling that strikes you when you realise you've bought precisely the right gift for a person? When they open it with delight, and you get that real good, gift-giving feeling? That isn't just born of the smug glow of getting it right. There's a science behind it.

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Experiments show evidence that the “joy of giving” has a biological basis in the brain, according to Jenny Santi, founder of Saint Partners Philanthropy Services and author of *The Giving Way to Happiness*.

“Altruism is hard-wired in the brain and is pleasurable,” she says. “We now know that when we give, two brain reward systems work together: the midbrain VTA [ventral tegumental area], which is the same part stimulated by food and sex, as well as the subgenual area, which is the area stimulated when humans see babies and romantic partners.

“Research from Carnegie Mellon University [also] shows that volunteering – that is giving – for at least 200 hours per year, dramatically lowers blood pressure in older adults. High blood pressure, or hypertension, triggers a chain reaction in adults that often leads to morbidity due to cardiovascular conditions.”



The joy of giving gifts to someone special provides a natural high. Photo: Alamy

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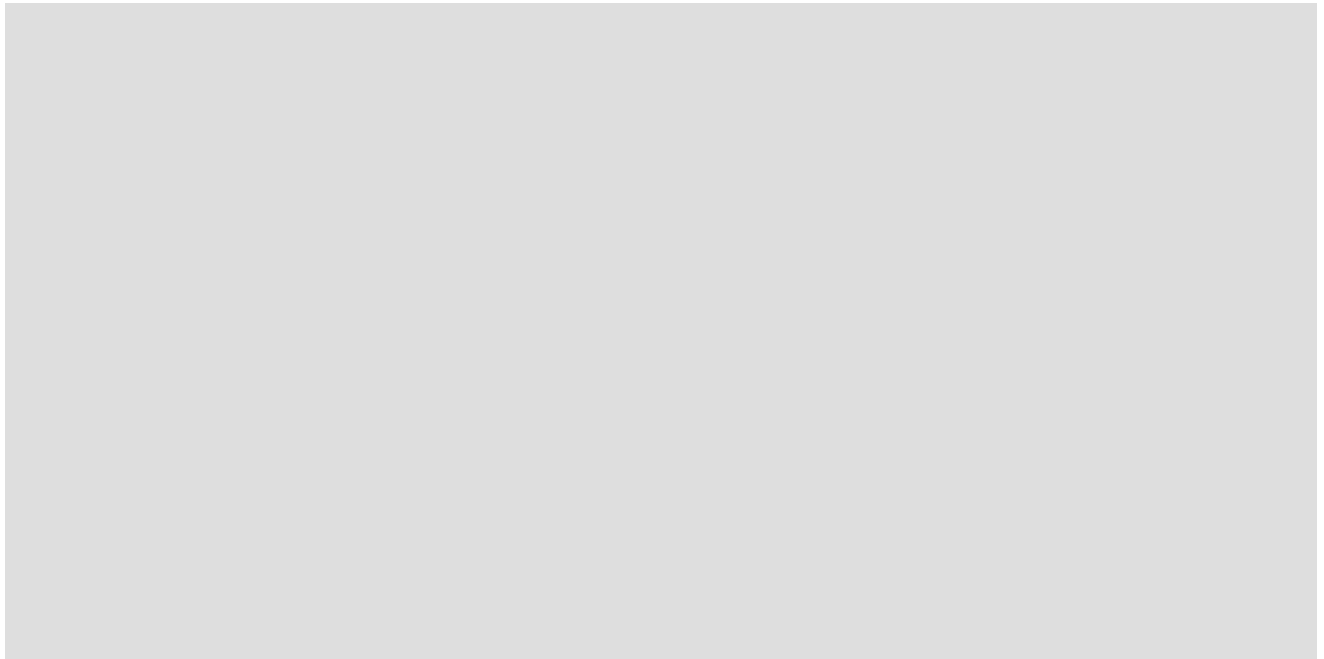
Hong Kong psychologist Scarlett Mattoli from The Psynamo Group agrees that “selecting, preparing and giving gifts for others can light up our mesolimbic

dopamine reward pathway, which supports motivation, reward, and learning”. A study by social psychologist Elizabeth Dunn at Canada’s University of British Columbia together with the Harvard Business School shows that people’s sense of happiness is greater when they spend relatively more on others than they do on themselves.

In her report, *Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness*, she suggests: “How people spend their money may be at least as important as how much money they earn ... spending money on other people may have a more positive impact on happiness than spending money on oneself.”

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The Chinese say: “If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.”



There are subtle ways of finding out what is the best present to buy a loved one. Photo: Alamy

Saint Francis of Assisi, a Catholic friar and preacher in 13th century Italy, believed, “For it is in giving that we receive.” Centuries later, British author and prime minister Winston Churchill said: “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.”

In his book *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the Dalai Lama observes that happiness does not come from material things, but rather from a deep, genuine concern for others' happiness.

And Santi says: "The benefits are not just mental, but also physical. The euphoric feeling we experience when we help others is what researchers call 'the helper's high', the powerful physical sensation associated with helping others." This is why it is so evident in volunteerism.



The helper's high is a classic example of nature's built-in reward system for those who help others

— Jenny Santi, founder of Saint Partners Philanthropy Services

Just as the runner's high happens when a runner's endorphin levels rise, the helper's high happens when people perform good deeds for others. "The helper's high is a

classic example of nature's built-in reward system for those who help others," Santi says.

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Hong Kong-based Dr Quratulain Zaidi at MindnLife agrees that “scientifically and biologically, the act of giving makes us feel good because it produces endorphins and these molecules generally create a sense of pleasure”. But the gift of giving goes further, she says: “Giving lights up our brain’s reward and pleasure centres, releasing oxytocin, a hormone that is associated with feelings of love and trust, creating a greater sense of happiness. Studies show that our brains are wired to derive pleasure from the act of giving.”

Generosity is embedded in our DNA – even if in some people it is embedded so deeply you rarely get to see it. As a species, we human beings are designed to be social community dwellers who like to get along with the group we eat with, live with, sleep with, work with. And part of that means looking out for them, looking after them, sharing with them.

British novelist Charles Darwin observed: “Communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best.” Communities thrive less well if overrun with self-centred, selfish individuals.