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# Want to be happy? Buy experiences, not things

Research shows that money can buy happiness, but how you spend it matters.



**LAURA MOSS**

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Even unpleasant vacation experiences — such as getting lost on an excursion — are later evaluated more positively than material purchases. (Photo: Fernando Jose V. Soares/Shutterstock)

What would bring you greater, longer-lasting happiness: purchasing an expensive item you've been eyeing — a bigger TV, a new couch, the latest smartphone — or booking that vacation you've been dreaming about?

You could use the material item every day, and you wouldn't have to wait very long for it — you could buy it today. That vacation on the other hand would be months away, and once it's over, all you'll have left are memories, photographs and maybe a souvenir.

If you weigh your options this way, it's logical to assume you'd derive the most pleasure from making the quick purchase — but according to science, that assumption is wrong.

"One of the enemies of happiness is adaptation," Thomas Gilovich, a psychology professor at Cornell University, told [Fast Company](#). "We buy things to make us happy, and we succeed, but only for a while. New things are exciting to us at first, but then we adapt to them."



Zip-lining? Oh, you'll remember that experience! (Photo: Ammit Jack/Shutterstock)

## Can you buy happiness?

While we know that [money does indeed buy happiness](#), it only does so up to a point. Studies show that after our basic needs are met, more money doesn't make us that much happier. However, how we spend any extra income plays a role in our happiness.

Gilovich has been studying the relationship between money and happiness for more than 20 years and has concluded that spending money on experiences — travel,

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outdoor activities, concerts, classes, movies — brings us more joy than buying material things.

Even though new cars or gadgets may make us happy in the short-term, the novelty quickly wears off.

In one of his studies, Gilovich asked people to report their happiness with major material or experiential purchases, and initially they ranked them about the same. However, over time, their satisfaction with material objects decreased while their satisfaction with experiences increased.

He says one reason for this diminishing satisfaction with material goods is that our experiences are a bigger part of our identity than our possessions.

"You can really like your material stuff. You can even think that part of your identity is connected to those things, but nonetheless they remain separate from you. In contrast, your experiences really are part of you. We are the sum total of our experiences," he said.

Another reason we value experiences even after they're over is because even negative experiences can become positive over time.

Gilovich found that when he interviewed people about an experience that negatively impacted their happiness, just talking about it made their evaluation of it improve. Why? Because even unpleasant experiences can later become funny stories or looked at as character-building opportunities, he says.

**Shared experiences** are also looked upon more favorably because they connect us to others more than shared consumption does. We feel more connected to people who have also backpacked through Europe than people who happen to have purchased the same iPhone.

Also, experiences make us happier because we're less likely to compare them to others' in the same way that we compare material goods.

"It certainly bothers us if we're on a vacation and see people staying in a better hotel or flying first-class, but it doesn't produce as much envy as when we're outgunned on material goods," Gilovich said.



Weeks later, you're likely to have better memories of waiting in the frigid cold for a gotta-have-it gadget than you'll have for the gadget itself. (Photo: Darren Hauck/Getty Images)

### The role of anticipation

But it isn't just how we evaluate past experiences that brings us pleasure; even simply anticipating future ones is more enjoyable than anticipating the purchase of a material object.

Gilovich found that experiential purchases like trips trump physical purchases because the value of buying anything begins before you actually purchase it. And while waiting for a beach vacation is filled with possibility, you know what you're getting with a material item.

"You can think about waiting for a delicious meal at a nice restaurant or looking forward to a vacation and how different that feels from waiting for, say, your pre-ordered iPhone to arrive. Or when the two-day shipping on Amazon Prime doesn't

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seem fast enough," Amit Kumar, one of Gilovich's colleagues, told [The Atlantic](#).

The researchers also found that the act of even waiting in line to make a purchase is more enjoyable for people intending to spend money on an experience.

Why? The abstract nature of future experiences may make them seem more gratifying, but it's also possible that waiting for an experience typically involves far less competition than waiting for a material item. Take some of the more disturbing headlines from [Black Friday](#), for example.

"You sometimes hear stories about people rioting, smashing windows, pepper-spraying one another, or otherwise treating others badly when they have to wait," Kumar said in a news release.

"Our work shows that this kind of behavior is much more likely in instances where people are waiting to acquire a possession than when they're waiting for tickets to a performance or to taste the offerings at their city's newest food truck."

In addition to making people happier, spending money on experiential purchases also makes people more generous and more likely to participate in social activities. Therefore, Gilovich's research could influence not only personal spending, but also spending on a much larger scale, affecting how much vacation time employers offer and how governments allocate spending on recreational spaces like parks.

"Our research is important to society because it suggests that overall well-being can be advanced by providing an infrastructure that affords experiences — such as parks, trails, beaches — as much as it does material consumption," Gilovich said.



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[Laura Moss](#) writes about a variety of topics with a focus on animals, science, language and culture. But she mostly writes about cats.

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