

Getting a Bargain is Good Deal for the Brain

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It is holiday shopping season and the only thing better than buying holiday gifts is finding a holiday bargain.

Hard work pays off

According to Scott Bea, PsyD, of Cleveland Clinic, finding a good deal isn't just good for our wallets, it also makes our brains feel good too.

He said this is especially true if we have to do some work to find it.

"It's like hitting a target," said Dr. Bea. "It's a desired objective that you deem worthwhile that you've got to work at a little bit and so whenever we have that experience, it feels like a big victory and that victory lights up the reward centers in our brains and it reinforces that activity so we're much more likely to do it again."

Dr. Bea said when we do our research, save, wait around, and shop around, it's more of a brain-victory than a physical victory of pushing and shoving your way to an item on Black Friday.

The 'feel good' high that we get from scoring a good deal is even sweeter when we think we're the only ones who found it.

Coming back for more

Dr. Bea said it's all about intermittent reinforcement. Intermittent reinforcement is what happens when we are rewarded inconsistently and occasionally.

This is what drives us to keep trying until we get what we want – like a big TV at a great price.

Anticipation of a reward releases chemicals to the brain called dopamine. Dopamine transmits signals between the brain's nerve cells, in the parts of the brain that keep us focused on gaining a prize.

When we find a bargain, the reward process ends and then we feel compelled to begin the process over again.

"We say things that are worth our while, you know, we have to work for and I think that's exactly where the pay-offs come from and they do really pay off," said Dr. Bea. "That is what makes it more likely that we'll do it again. We get a nice drench of positive chemistry in our brains and we'll go out and look for another bargain that way."

Signs of trouble

Of course it's important to establish some rules. Dr. Bea reminds us that we can do anything to excess, even bargain shopping.

He said that for people who have a hoarding problem, the 'good deal' happiness is an addictive relationship with that good feeling of finding that deal.