The Psychology Behind Gift-Giving

It’s that time of the year when people’s attention is focused on the holiday ritual of gift-giving. Shoppers are scurrying about looking for the right gift for the special people in their lives.

Gift exchange is a major part of celebrating the holidays, but did you know the whole act of gift-giving can offer psychological benefits? Giving a gift is a universal way to show interest, appreciation, and gratitude, as well as strengthen bonds with others, sources say.

“There is the whole act — determining what needs to be given and making sure it fits with the person,” says Devin A. Byrd, Ph.D., associate professor and chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences at South University — Savannah. “There is an emotional lift when searching for the gift.”

Better to give than to receive, gift-giving is also an act of altruism — unselfish concern for the well-being of others. When we give without expecting anything in return, we are improving our psychological health.

“In lifespan and developmental psychology, we teach about altruism and how it benefits individuals and society,” says Dr. Darlene Silvernail, owner of Silvernail Consultant Services and Psychology instructor at South University — West Palm Beach. “Gift-giving feels good internally, and there are extrinsic benefits also.”

There is an enormous sense of satisfaction when seeing the expression on the face of someone you’ve given a gift to. A way to express feelings, giving reinforces appreciation and acknowledgement of each other. The feelings expressed mainly depend on the relationship between giver and recipient.

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“If it is friend to friend, people will remain thoughtful,” Byrd says. “If it is a romantic relationship, people will try to go for sentiment as well. [Gift-giving] taps into how we want to connect with that individual.”

He says gift-giving is also a way for the giver to reduce guilt.

“That really comes into play when you have people giving from afar,” he says. “Now, it is a lot easier to order a gift online and send it. It can be a replacement for not being there with the person. They gain satisfaction when they find the right gift and that brings emotional happiness.”

“If you do something positive, positive psychology says you attract positive,” Silvernail says. “People don’t always give just to get something back, but many times we think ‘if I do a good deed, something good will happen for me.’”

The expectation of reciprocity often comes with gift-giving, Byrd says.

“I imagine that there is a small subset of us who do give and expect nothing in return. You can tag that with those who give anonymously,” he says. “But, I think there is an innate desire to receive when we give. No matter the gift, people want to receive.”

Psychologists aren’t the only ones who understand the mental and emotional benefits of gift-giving. The holiday season is also a big time for advertisers to tap into the feelings of consumers in an effort to get them to buy products. It seems as if Christmas advertising arrives earlier every year.

Whether it’s through television commercials and shopping websites filled with holiday music and graphics or store displays offering festive cheer, consumers can’t escape holiday advertising.
“Advertisers are very good at creating a culture of giving and being prepared for finding that right gift,” Byrd says. “There is a great expectation and buildup of what it will mean when a person receives it. Advertisers also know about the satisfaction of the deal — something that looks like an expensive gift but the person purchased it for a deal.”

Gifts can also bring on feelings of negativity for both the giver and recipient when the gift is much more or much less than they expected.

“A person can have immediate feelings of resentment if they feel a person has not spent enough,” Byrd says. “They feel undervalued or cheated. Or perhaps the gift expresses more feelings than expected.”

Although gift-giving can be a de-stressor and create balance, the hunt for the perfect gift for friends and family can also cause a lot of stress. The costs of gifts and what it takes to package them can be a financial burden.

“People need to remember there are ways to acknowledge others without having to purchase something,” Byrd says. “Christmas cards and photos tell you that you are in that person’s network and you are important enough to keep updated with what’s going on in that person’s life.”

Activities such as gatherings or parties are also a good way to share the holiday spirit without exchanging gifts.

“I think the focus should stay on what the holidays are really about and not on the commercial aspects of it,” Silvernail says. “Gifts don’t have to be huge monetary things to make everyone feel good.”