

Skip Buying Extra Stuff And Take A Vacation Instead

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Shopping for that new high-definition television this summer? Skip it, and take a vacation instead, says a University of Colorado at Boulder psychologist who studies happiness.

Assistant Professor Leaf Van Boven has conducted numerous surveys and experiments spanning several years and has found that life experiences, such as vacations, generally make people from various walks of life happier than material possessions.

One reason for this is that experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation, or mental editing, than material possessions. And vacations are a perfect example of this, according to Van Boven.

"Often we take a vacation and things just don't always go according to plan," Van Boven said. "The weather may not be perfect, or you spend hours waiting in line. The nice thing about memory is that we sort of forget about all those inconveniences. We put this very favorable spin on experiences, and that's harder to do for material possessions, because they are what they are."

It's not that we block out the negative memories altogether, Van Boven says, but rather that we just don't remember them with the same force as the good memories.

"When I went to Disneyland last summer with my wife and two kids, the whole meaning of that trip was to give the kids this experience of seeing

all of those characters and going on the fun rides," he said.

While he did his share of standing in line, that's not the memory he carries.

"In my memory, it's the rides and seeing the characters and it's spending way too much money for a hamburger for this idyllic family meal," Van Boven said.

Another reason he cites for hitting the road over buying the new TV is that experiences contribute to social relationships. "They have more of what we refer to as social value, and we know that social relationships are a huge component of well-being and life satisfaction," Van Boven said.

Closely tied to this idea that experiences have more social value is that people also usually have intrinsic motivations for pursuing experiences like vacations.

"One of the things that people tell us is that when they pursue experiences they often do so out of a desire to satisfy intrinsic goals, so they will go backpacking or skiing because they want to challenge themselves, they want to push themselves in new ways," he said.

Material things are much less likely to be viewed that way. In fact, Van Boven says people who pursue experiences more than material things are often more popular with others too.

"When you are known as being experiential you become a more likeable person than when you are known as a materialistic person," he said.

So how can we get the most out of our vacations? Van Boven has two suggestions that he says are somewhat contradictory.

The first is to just relax when planning a vacation. Van Boven says there's too much pressure to take vacations to the hottest new spots, to appease relatives or to check it off the "go to" list.

"We should be worried about taking vacations with the wrong motives," Van Boven said. "I think we ought to be a little more on guard about the motives underlying the types of vacations that we take."

His other advice is to fit a little more into our vacations.

"Sometimes you just want to sit down and relax and not do anything, and that's great," Van Boven said. "But the problem is if you spend all your time doing that, what are the memories that you'll have?"

"Even if you're a little bit tired, or tempted to just sit around the hotel room or sit around the beach, maybe it's worth going out and doing some of those things you really would like to do, because chances are when you look back you'll forget the fact that you were a little bit tired at that moment," he said.

One other option for vacationers is to volunteer for part of a trip.

"I have never, ever heard someone regret helping someone else," Van Boven said. "Go somewhere, help out and then spend a few days traveling on your own and relaxing on your vacation. That's a wonderful combination."

Unfortunately several current studies and surveys have shown that Americans are taking fewer and shorter vacations than in years past.

"Who knows why Americans don't take more vacations," said Van Boven. "I think part of the reason is that it's very easy to believe that we are going to take a lot of vacations in the future, but for right now, we

need to work hard to earn the money so that we can go take these vacations. But we know this doesn't always happen."

Source: University of Colorado

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