

# Hunger drives unethical acts, but only in the quest for food

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Ever been so hungry that you can't think of anything but finding food?

Research from the University of Washington Foster School of Business finds that the single-mindedness that results from a state of hunger makes people more likely to commit unethical acts that would satisfy that hunger—but less likely to lie, cheat or steal for reasons that don't address the immediate physiological need.

"We confirm that physiologically deprived people do engage in unethical behavior related to obtaining physiological satiation," said co-author Kai Chi "Sam" Yam, a recent doctoral student at the Foster School who is now an assistant professor of management at the National University of Singapore. "But we also find that hungry and thirsty people engage in less physiologically-unrelated unethical behavior."

The study, titled "The Hungry Thief: Physiological Deprivation and its Paradoxical Effects on Unethical Conduct," has been published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

The research also indicates that a strong and clearly communicated ethical culture can minimize the risk of unethical acts—even in the service of an immediate bodily need for food or drink.

The prevailing theory in psychology is that physiological deprivation depletes willpower, leading to increased [unethical behavior](#) for all manner of reasons.

But Yam and co-author Scott Reynolds, a professor of management at the Foster School, shared a question about this conventional wisdom.

"Much of the literature takes the assumption that only our willpower keeps us from doing bad. Deplete it and our baser instincts take over," Reynolds said. "But we wanted to know if maybe depleting willpower might send people in the opposite direction."

To find out, Yam, Reynolds and Jacob Hirsh at the University of Toronto designed five studies. In the first few, they administered a simple ethical test to students going in and coming out of a university cafeteria. The idea was to compare the behaviors of those who were physiologically depleted—hungry—versus those who were physiologically satiated—full. Participants were asked to self-report their performance on a set of impossible math problems, and were offered a reward of either snack food or office swag for every "correct" answer they claimed to have provided.

"Generally speaking, those in a depleted state of willpower—in our study, headed into the cafeteria—would lie for the chips, but not for the notebooks," Reynolds said.

Subsequent studies extended the examination of physiological deprivation to thirst, with similar results.

What's happening here? A measure of single-mindedness indicated that the hungry and thirsty study participants could think of little else but finding food or drink. This laser focus drove their actions.

"When we are hungry, we're activating the system in our brain that focuses our attention on achieving goals," Reynolds explained. "Hunger is going to make us very focused on achieving the goal of getting food. And so that's what drives our behavior. And if our attention is directed

toward getting food, then it's not going to be attracted to all the other kinds of temptations that might be out there."

Organizations around the globe have cause for concern regarding the ethical actions of their employees—whether they work in an assembly plant in Shenzhen or a high-rise office suite in Manhattan.

Physiological deprivation of all kinds—hunger, thirst and fatigue—can be difficult to prevent systematically. But it shouldn't be encouraged, Reynolds said.

"There are some organizations that subscribe to the notion that you can't be a good employee if you're not a tired employee, or haven't skipped a meal today for work," he said. "We get the sense, intuitively, that maybe that's not so wise. But now we actually have some evidence that shows it's not wise. Good employees are well-rested and take care of their basic body needs so they can concentrate on things that really matter."

Reynolds added one other bit of wisdom from this and other research: Culture can influence ethical behavior for good or ill. One of the study conditions was awareness of rules and guidelines. When undergraduate participants were reminded of the university honor code, for example, they were less willing to bend the rules—even when the reward for doing so would satisfy an intense hunger or thirst.

"It's important to remind leaders that organizations can take steps to get people to behave better at work," Reynolds said. "And when your employees might be physiologically depleted in one or more ways, even subtle reminders of a strong ethical culture can help them resist temptation."

**More information:** "The hungry thief: Physiological deprivation and its effects on unethical behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human*

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