

Fundraisers who appeal to donors' fond memories by evoking their emotions may get larger gifts, new research suggests

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The emotions donors feel when they decide whether to give money to nonprofits can affect the size of their gift.

That's what [my research team found](#) when we partnered with a small liberal arts college during its fall fund drive.

Fundraisers used their standard phone pitch when they asked around 100 alumni to chip in. During another 100 calls, selected randomly, the fundraisers first asked the alumni to reflect on "a person or event in their past that had particularly benefited them since graduating."

We found that people who were asked to reflect on things that have benefited them were not more likely to make a pledge. But the average pledge they made increased by about 90% to US\$27 from \$14.

As fellow economist Steven Furnagiev, college student Rebecca Forbes and [I](#) explained in the academic journal Theory and Decision, we found that the emotions these donors felt when making their pledge was responsible for this difference.

Nonprofits advance many causes by engaging in activities like conserving nature, reducing poverty, protecting [human rights](#) and strengthening education. Figuring out what leads people to give more to support these groups could help these organizations raise more money and accomplish more of their goals.

Prompting alumni to reflect on things they feel grateful for is what's called a "nudge" in [behavioral economics](#). One [explanation](#) for why the nudge we used with one group led it to pledge bigger gifts is that most people are inclined to focus more on [their difficulties rather than their good fortune](#).

Our study suggests that when people are thinking about what's gone right in their lives, they are more willing to donate more [money](#).

Other [researchers](#) have also [found](#) that [feelings can play a role](#) when

[donors make decisions](#). Those studies had similar results but were largely done in less realistic settings.

Despite this research's being conducted in a real-world situation, it is still limited in scope. We don't know, for example, whether donors might respond the same way if they weren't being asked to support their alma mater. We also can't say whether evoking different emotions, aside from gratitude, might have different effects.

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