

You're never too busy for self-gifting, study finds

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People who are feeling tense due to demands at work or home tend not to reward themselves with gifts, new research finds—even though a new product or visit to the spa might be exactly what they need.

"When people are anxious about money and time pressures, they believe that they won't be able to focus on the self-gift experience and therefore won't benefit, and so they don't take opportunities to self-gift," said Jacqueline Rifkin, assistant professor at the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell's SC Johnson College of Business and lead author of "No Bandwidth to Self-Gift: How Feeling Constrained Discourages Self-Gifting," which published Nov. 15 in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"For example," Rifkin said, "if you were offered an opportunity to get a massage during a particularly busy time of year, would you do it? We find probably not, because you figure you'd be too stressed out and distracted, and wouldn't actually be able to relax.

"The unfortunate paradox though, is that this way of thinking is counterproductive to wellness. It's when we're feeling the most crunched that individuals can actually benefit most from self-gifting," she said.

Rifkin and her co-authors, Kelley Gullo Wight, assistant professor of marketing at the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, and Keisha M. Cutright, associate professor at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, started the study in 2018 and ran a series of experiments over the course of several years. The paper was conducted using behavioral experiments, both online and in person in a behavioral lab.

The researchers looked at time, money and mental health pressures, and how they all can make us less interested in self-gifting. In one experiment, they showed participants an ad for a fictional product and gaged their interest levels. For half of participants, they added a self-gifting tagline, which encouraged the product to be consumed with a happiness-based intention—"Carve out me-time," for instance, or "create a special moment."

They found that when participants felt more stressed about squeezed budgets, busy schedules, or lengthy to-do-lists, they were less interested in the products with self-gifting taglines. They purchased fewer of the items and indicated lower interest in trying them out. When asked why, people indicated that they wouldn't be able to really enjoy the experience.

Rifkin and her colleagues became especially curious if this line of thinking was right, or if people were accidentally undercutting their own happiness. They followed up with studies where people engaged in self-gifting experiences—attempting to create the special moment—to see how it affected their happiness. Here, they found that the people who were initially feeling stressed were much happier and more relaxed after self-gifting. They felt less stressed and less crunched for time.

"It was pretty interesting to have a project that carried over from before the pandemic to during, since we had to move all our experimental paradigms online, and also adapt to the fact that people completely changed how they were thinking about self-gifting, [self-care](#) and their resources," Rifkin said. "More broadly, though, I think this is an opportunity for [business professionals](#) to use their influence to positively encourage or 'nudge' consumers to engage in behaviors that will enhance their well-being, like self-gifting."

Rifkin said the new research benefits not only consumers, but helps anyone in the wellness industry think more precisely about how to market self-gifting-oriented products. For example, the types of products that tend to be marketed as self-[gifts](#)— such as [face masks](#) and essential oil diffusers—should not be paired with language that evokes constraint or scarcity (e.g., one-day only sale; items are going fast), which goes against classic marketing stratagems.

Instead, marketers can use language in their communications to

encourage consumers to treat themselves, even when they don't think they have the bandwidth to do so.

"My hope is that understanding these findings can help people challenge some of their internal narratives about when is vs. isn't a good time to do something for yourself," Rifkin said. "I know I have tried to change my habits a bit as a result of our research findings."

More information: Jacqueline R Rifkin et al, No Bandwidth to Self-Gift: How Feeling Constrained Discourages Self-Gifting, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucac053](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac053)

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