

Want to Be Happy? Buy More Takeout and Hire a Maid, Study Suggests



Researchers found that paying others to do tasks one dreads could lead to more happiness. This owner of a New York City cleaning business found that the happiness of others could be profitable. Credit...Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

By [Niraj Chokshi](#)

July 27, 2017

It's a question central to daily life: Do you spend money to save time or spend time to save money? Well, if happiness is the goal, you might consider opening that wallet.

That's the takeaway of a study, [published this week](#) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, whose findings suggest that spending money to save time may reduce stress about the limited time in the day, thereby improving happiness.

“People who spent money to buy themselves time, such as by outsourcing disliked tasks, reported greater overall life satisfaction,” said Ashley Whillans, an assistant professor at the Harvard Business School and lead author of the study, which was based on a series of surveys from several countries. Researchers did not see the same effect when people used money for material goods.

In one round, Ms. Whillans and her colleagues surveyed nearly 4,500 people in the United States, Denmark, Canada and the Netherlands on well-being and timesaving purchases, such as ordering takeout food, taking a cab, hiring household help or paying someone to run an errand. In another round, using a broader definition of such purchases, they surveyed about 1,800 other Americans.

About 28 percent of those in the first round and half in the second reported spending money to save time. In both cases, those who made such purchases reported greater life satisfaction than those who did not.

And it didn't matter if they were rich or poor: People benefited from buying time regardless of where they fell on the income spectrum. (The authors note, though, that may not hold true for the poorest of the poor.)

“If there's some task that just thinking about it fills you with dread, then it's probably worth considering whether you can afford to buy your way out of it,” said Elizabeth Dunn, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia and an author of the paper.

The surveys established a link between buying time and happiness, but the researchers wanted to see whether one causes the other.



For greater life satisfaction, according to the study, order takeout food, take a cab or pay someone to run an errand. This was found to be true regardless of income. Credit...Michael Appleton for The New York Times

So they conducted an experiment with a few dozen Canadians. First, they provided the participants with \$40 on two consecutive weekends to spend, as directed, on either timesaving

purchases or material purchases, like board games, fancy wine, or clothes. Then, they asked the participants their mood at the end of the day.

As the researchers predicted, spending money to save time appeared to reduce time-related stress and increase well-being, while spending on material goods did not have the same effect.

But, despite its benefits, the practice of buying time is not as popular as one might expect, they found. Even among more than 800 Dutch millionaires surveyed, all of whom surely could afford to do so, only a slight majority spent money on timesaving tasks.

Professors Whillans and Dunn offered a few guesses as to why, at least in the United States: a Protestant work ethic that values being busy or guilt over paying someone for a task that people could easily do themselves, for example.

“We want to seem like we have it all together and we might be therefore resistant to spending money on timesaving purchases even when we can afford it,” Ms. Whillans said.

A version of this article appears in print on July 28, 2017, Section A, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: It Turns Out Money Can Buy (Some) Happiness.