



## Visceral needs and donation decisions: Do people identify with suffering or with relief?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- People tend to be more generous when satisfied than when experiencing a need.
- A partial relief from a recent visceral need promotes helping a corresponding need.
- A partial relief from a recent visceral need does not promote helping in general.

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### ABSTRACT

We examine the relations between people's experience of an ongoing visceral need (hunger) as well as the relief from that need and the willingness to help needy others actively experiencing the same or a different need. Results of two studies – one asking participants about the amount of time that had elapsed since they last ate and the other manipulating levels of hunger by asking people to fast before the experiment – reveal that overall, people tend to be more generous when satisfied than when actively experiencing a visceral need. When people experience an ongoing need, they tend to be less responsive to others' needs even when those needs match their own visceral state. However, experiencing partial relief from a recent visceral need, like eating something after a few hours of fasting, promotes the helping of others who are experiencing a corresponding need (hunger) but does not promote helping in general.

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### Introduction

Suppose you are organizing a fundraising event whose goal is to raise the funds needed to feed starving people in India, and the event includes a gala dinner. When is the best time to ask the potential donors for their donations: at the beginning of the evening, when they are still hungry and may better identify with the cause (hunger in India); after the appetizer has been eaten, when the potential donors have experienced some relief from their own hunger; or perhaps at the end of the main course, when they are satiated?

In this paper we explore the relations between a temporary, physical condition (visceral need or a relief from such a need) felt by people (potential donors) and their willingness to help needy others experiencing the same or a different need. Specifically, we ask whether one's personal experience of current or recent physical distress (e.g., hunger, thirst, heat, cold, etc.) increases that person's willingness to help somebody experiencing a similar distress. For example, how does hunger (or

recent relief from hunger) affect a potential donor's willingness to help hungry people as compared with willingness to help people with other needs (such as housing, heating, or medical aid)?

The literature on pro-social decisions seems to suggest contradictory answers to that question. On the one hand, experiencing the plight of the target may enhance perspective taking and increase altruistic behavior. Empathy, the ability to identify with and understand how someone else is feeling, is at the heart of altruism and pro-social behavior and was found to be a major part of the motive force driving people to act on behalf of others, even when this act is costly to themselves (e.g., [Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981](#); [Batson et al., 1997](#)). Intuitively, people who experience firsthand a difficulty suffered by others should benefit from a better understanding of the targets' needs, thereby increasing their empathy for their plight. That, in turn, should enhance caring and helping behaviors. Indeed, there is some evidence in the literature suggesting that people who had personally experienced a misfortune in the past are more likely to help others who suffer from the same misfortune. For example, [Barnett, Tetreault, Esper, and Bristow \(1986\)](#) demonstrate these relations in the context of sympathy toward rape victims and [Christy and Harrison \(1994\)](#) in the context of willingness to intervene in cases of abused children. However, in these studies the experienced misfortunes are rare, shaking events, while

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we are interested in the effect of visceral needs that we all consistently and rapidly experience (hunger, thirst, fatigue, etc).

Although people are familiar with their visceral drives and may be expected to take this drive into consideration even when not experiencing it at the time of a decision, they tend to underestimate the influence of these drives on their behavior in situations where they do not experience any such drive at that particular moment. For example, hungry shoppers tend to purchase more food than they intended (relative to non-hungry shoppers; Nisbett & Kanouse, 1969). Similarly, when asked to imagine how they would feel if they were lost in a forest without food or water, participants were more likely to understand the need for water (rather than food) after vigorous exercise than before exercising (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Loewenstein (1996) called this effect the “cold-to-hot empathy gap”, suggesting that people in a cold state (not experiencing a visceral drive) tend to underestimate the influence of a hot state (experiencing a visceral drive like hunger or thirst). He argues that this underestimation of future or past visceral drives is due to constrained memory for visceral experiences. Thus, people in a “cold state” may find it difficult to imagine or to estimate the needs of others who experience hunger, thirst or other needs. Likewise, people in a hot state are expected to better understand the need and therefore, are expected to more strongly identify with others experiencing it.

However, in order to help others, people must first recognize the other's need and pay real attention to it. Research on pro-social behavior has shown that being distracted by external factors like noise, hurry or competing stimuli (e.g. Darley & Batson, 1973; Dickert & Slovic, 2009) as well as by internal factors, like having to deal with one's own concerns, losses and needs, constrain the amount of attention and energy one could spare to others and as a result decrease helping (e.g. Thompson, Cowan, & Rosenhan, 1980). Attention and focus on the needy other is a precondition for the arousal of empathic concern which was found to be an important factor underlying the decision to help (Dickert & Slovic, 2009). Batson's research distinguishes between ‘empathic concern’ in which a perceiver is focused on the needy while wishing to reduce their suffering and the more egoistic motivation elicited by ‘personal distress’ in which the perceiver is focused on his/her own distress (even when caused by encountering the needy other). While empathic concern encourages altruistic helping; personal distress is less likely to enhance helping, especially when helping is difficult or when the perceiver has an easy way to escape the situation (e.g. Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). Actively experiencing a need may increase the focus on the self (rather than on the needy other) which is less likely to increase helping behaviors.

Considering the above lines of research, we suggest that people who are actively experiencing a need will be less likely to help needy others (regardless of whether the other person's needs are similar or different to their own) due to the focus on their own needy state. Likewise, people who are not experiencing an ongoing need will be more likely to help others in need (independent of the specific need). Finally, people who have experienced some relief will be more able to pay attention to the needs of others. Moreover, people who recently experienced (even partial) relief from a visceral need will be more likely to help others with a similar need due to the increase in perspective taking and the salience of the change in their own state (which they have just experienced). In the immediate aftermath of that relief people are more likely to take the perspective and understand others experiencing the same or a similar need in a way that allows them to focus on and address that need. However according to the ‘hot-to-cold empathy gap’, as more time passes since a person has entered a “cold” state his/her identification with the state of the needy other may relax, causing them to forget the significance of that specific need as they consider it from a more distant, “objective” perspective.

We examine this prediction in two studies in which we collected real donations from participants (study 2) and we recorded participant willingness to donate (study 1) to needy people, either to purchase food

or to help pay their rents. In study 1 we asked participants about their visceral need (amount of time that had elapsed since they last ate) and asked whether they would be willing to donate to one of two causes: to purchase food vs. to help with rental payments for needy people. Half of the participants received an energy bar before being asked about the donation. In study 2 we manipulated the level of experienced visceral need (hunger) and recorded actual donations by the participants to the same two causes (purchasing food vs. helping with rental payments for needy people).

## Study 1

The first study was designed to examine the influence of experienced visceral need (hunger) and the relief from such a need (after eating an energy bar) on willingness to help others actively experiencing the same need (hunger) vs. to help others who experience a different, unrelated need (rental payments). We asked participants to report the time that had elapsed since their last meal and gave half of them an energy bar before asking them how willing they were to donate to the two different needs.

## Method

Study participants included 108 undergraduate students from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, each of who received 10 shekels in exchange for their time. They were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 × 2 design manipulating two variables: relief – receiving an energy bar at the beginning vs. at the end of the experiment; and need – willingness to donate (WTD) to purchase food for the poor vs. to help poor people with rental payments.

All participants were asked to fill out a short survey on marketing at the beginning of the experiment. Participants in the relief condition were given the energy bar and were asked to eat it before answering the questionnaire. Next they received a short booklet containing the questionnaire and were asked to answer the questions in the order they were presented without returning to already completed pages. On the first page they were asked a few questions about the energy bar (taste, wrapping, etc.). Next, they read a description of the collaboration between our lab and a local charity organization that helps poor people in the city of Beer-Sheva. Participants were told that the association is now organizing a fundraising campaign either to purchase food for the poor or to help them with their rental payments. They were asked whether they would be willing to donate money to that cause if the association decides to put a fundraising stall on their campus. Participants who expressed an interest to donate were asked how much money they would donate at that moment. To increase the honesty of their responses, participants were told of the importance that they answer the question about the donation seriously because the association will base its decision of whether to install a fundraising stall on the campus on the participants' responses.

On the last page of the questionnaire participants were asked to recall the last time they had eaten (before they consumed the energy bar at the beginning of the experiment), recording the time that had elapsed in hours and minutes. Participants in the no relief condition read first about the fundraising campaign and then answered the WTD question. They received the energy bar only at the end of the experiment, at which time they reported the amount of time that had elapsed since they last ate.

## Results

To examine the role of participant hunger level (measured by the time that had elapsed since they last ate) on the willingness to donate to the different needs (purchase food vs. to help with rental payments) under the two relief conditions, a simple regression analysis was conducted on WTD. The predictors were the three variables (fasting time,

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