

# There's a reason you feel better when you give

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It's not just helping the poor, the arts or the church that makes giving to charity feel good.

Giving affects the same part of the brain stimulated by sex, drugs and money, according to researchers at the National Institutes of Health.

Fundraisers have long invoked religion, volunteerism, family and cultural traditions, tax breaks, peer pressure and the desire to make a difference or leave a legacy as being big factors in charitable giving.

But NIH researchers used MRIs to monitor brain activity as 19 people made decisions to give — or not give — to a variety of causes.

For charitable giving, their imaging study “strongly supports the existence of ‘warm glow’ at a biological level,” said Dr. Jorge Moll, the lead researcher. “It helps convince people that doing good can make them feel good; altruism therefore doesn't need to be ONLY sacrifice.”

Charitable giving is big business. It totaled \$4.9 billion in the state in 2004, according to the latest available figures, the Minnesota Council on Foundations estimated last week. And fundraisers and researchers have long sought to analyze giving patterns.

Some Minnesota fundraisers and donors were told of the connection to other pleasures.

“That's fabulous,” said Lauren Segal, president and chief executive of the Greater Twin Cities United Way, which raises more than \$80 million a year in cash and pledges.

She wasn't aware of the research, but said donors have told her that giving “can make you feel better than you ever imagined.”

Tom Lowe, who has given millions to charity personally and through his Lyman Lumber companies, called the research “pretty humorous.”

However, in writing a \$10,000 check to charity, “you'd get a good feeling, [but] it doesn't give me a big sex drive,” said Lowe, a co-founder of the One Percent Club, which encourages increased giving by well-off Minnesotans.

“I think people have to have some sort of an altruistic streak in there someplace that prompts them to ... give something back,” he said.

## Testing out motives

Moll said he wanted to “tease apart” selfish and altruistic motivations, to explore economic and moral values.

His research team gave \$128 each to the 19 people — a large enough sample for valid conclusions, he said. They were confronted with choices about whether to give money — or to oppose giving — to controversial charities linked to abortion, children's rights, the death penalty, euthanasia, gender equality, nuclear power and war.

They gave an average of \$51 from their \$128 and pocketed the rest.

In a paper published last fall, researchers said they found that giving activated two areas of the brain: the part that is activated by reward reinforcement, which also is activated by sex, drugs and money, and the part that influences social attachments, trust and economic interactions.

The two areas work not in competition but together, which “enables us to make altruistic decisions,” Moll said.

Opposition to a cause sets off the part of the brain that's linked to anger and moral disgust, the researchers found.

Sometimes donors despair about their money going elsewhere, perhaps to taxes. For instance, William McKnight, the 3M executive who started the McKnight Foundation, the state's largest, “would do whatever he could not to pay taxes,” his daughter, the late Virginia Binger, once said.

Jud Dayton, the new chairman of the One Percent Club, said he's not so sure about a “sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll” connection to giving. But he added, “You're helping people, and that's got to feel good.”

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## **GIVING AND THE BRAIN**

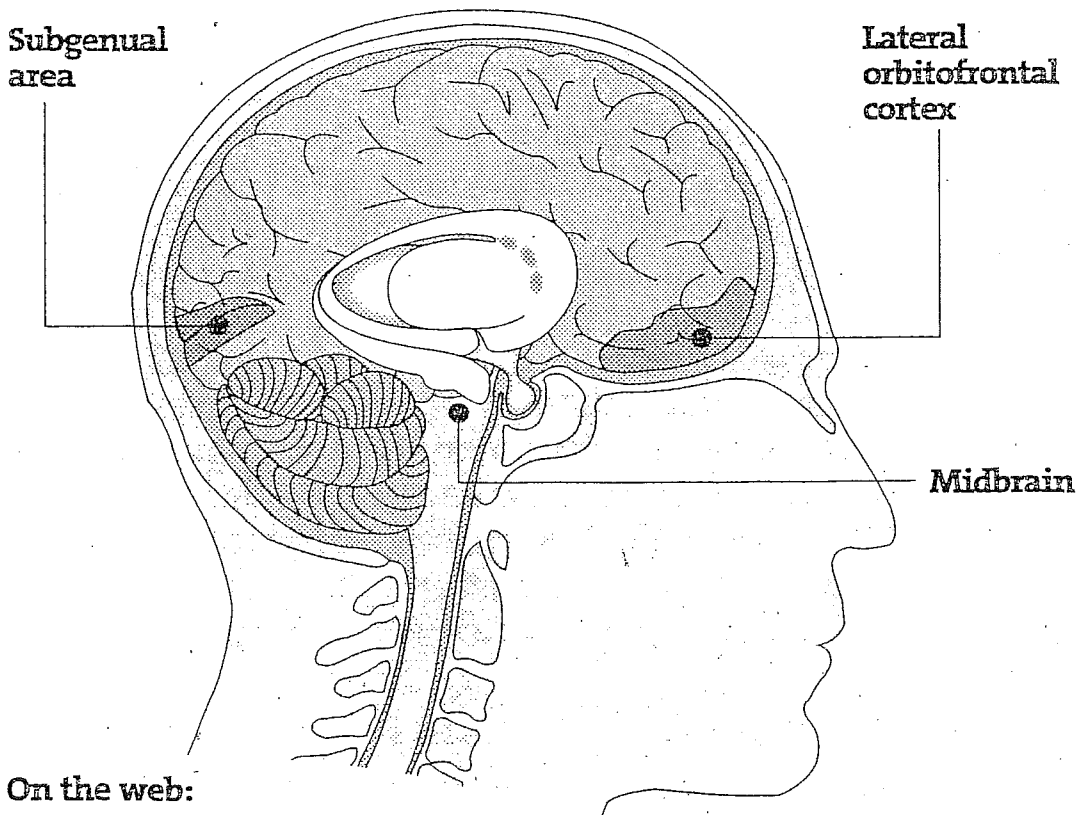
Researchers led by Dr. Jorge Moll at the National Institutes of Health used functional MRI to examine brain activity of 19 people confronted with decisions about charitable giving.

**They found that donating affects two brain “reward” systems working together:**

- The midbrain ventral tegmental area-striatum mesolimbic network, which also is stimulated by food, sex, drugs and money.
- The subgenual area, which is related to humans viewing their babies and romantic partners and to other social attachments.

**Researchers also found that:**

- Rejecting certain causes stimulates the lateral orbitofrontal cortex, which is linked to anger, moral disgust and other aversive traits.



**On the web:**

- An abstract and supporting documents are at [www.pnas.org](http://www.pnas.org). The full article, published Oct. 9, 2006, requires a subscription to Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences Online.
- Dr. Jorge Moll is at [mollj@ninds.nih.gov](mailto:mollj@ninds.nih.gov)