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Tightwads and Spendthrifts

By *JOHN TIERNEY*

As promised in my column today, here's a [survey](#) you can take to see where you fall on the Tightwad-Spendthrift scale developed by economists at Carnegie Mellon University. I took it, and the result independently confirms the shopping brain-scan experiment I describe in the Science Times [column](#): I'm a spendthrift.

I'm not proud of that, but I don't yearn to be a tightwad, either, not as it's defined by the economists. They find that tightwads aren't any happier than spendthrifts, and suffer more in some ways. "It's like the old line about a hero dying once and a coward dying a thousand deaths," says George Loewenstein, one of the CMU economists. "A spendthrift suffers *after* he buys something. A tightwad suffers *while* he buys it and then *again* afterwards."

Loewenstein and his colleagues, Scott Rick and Cynthia Cryder, distinguish "tightwadism" from "frugality," which is measured (naturally) on a whole separate scale developed by other social scientists. Being frugal means you enjoy saving money, and people who are more frugal tend to be happier than average. Tightwads are less happy. They pass up purchases not because they enjoy saving money or are sensibly calculating the benefits, but because they hate to part with cash. They do without things they could afford that would genuinely improve their lives.

The happiest people are the "unconflicted" consumers who fall in the middle of the the scale. Of the more than 2,600 people surveyed, the CMU researchers [report](#), 61 percent were in this unconflicted range. Some 21 percent were tightwads, and 18 percent were spendthrifts. It may seem odd, given the public concern about shopaholics, to hear that we spendthrifts are outnumbered by tightwads, but Loewenstein figures that's because the serious shoppers are more visible: you can pick us out because of all the stuff in our bags.

Tightwadism isn't so easy to spot. I like to think of it as a silent epidemic. Some of its victims probably don't even recognize it themselves. If you take the survey and discover you're one, don't be shy. Let me know about it. We spendthrifts and tightwads can help each other find moderation and happiness. Even if you can't splurge on yourself, you could always pick up something for us. Come shop with us.