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Expense-Account Science

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Scientists are at last beginning to fathom the mystery of the business lunch. They find that your chances of getting someone else to accept an unfair deal depends on the other person's level of serotonin, a neurotransmitter created in the body by an amino acid obtained through eating.

In an experiment reported in [Science](#), researchers at the [University of Cambridge](#) and U.C.L.A. manipulated the diet of subjects and found that people with low levels of serotonin become less likely to make a deal when playing the "Ultimatum Game." In this game, one person proposes a way to divide a sum of money between two players. If the second player agrees to the division, they get the money; if not, neither gets anything. Normally, if the first player proposes keeping the lion's share for himself, the second player will accept the deal about about half the time — he may resent the inequity, but he realizes that getting a small share is better than nothing.

But in this experiment the players rejected that deal 80 percent of the time when their serotonin levels were low, and it wasn't because they were cranky or depressed, the researchers report. They conclude that lower levels of serotonin "can selectively alter reactions to unfairness," and note that in the experiment this condition "increased retaliation to perceived unfairness without affecting mood, fairness judgments, basic reward processing or response inhibition."

The lead author, Molly Crockett, a psychologist at Cambridge, said: "Our results suggest that serotonin plays a critical role in social decision-making by normally keeping aggressive social responses in check. Changes in diet and stress cause our serotonin levels to fluctuate naturally, so it's important to understand how this might affect our everyday decision-making."

I asked one of the other authors, Matthew D. Lieberman, a psychologist at U.C.L.A., if this offered a new justification for the expense-account lunch. His reply:

It depends on how much the particular meal actually changes serotonin levels relative to what was done in the lab. That said, in principle, there does seem to be something to the idea. Indeed, if restaurants commonly involve eating foods that do raise serotonin levels then we may become conditioned to be more accepting of other people's offers just by going to the restaurant, even before eating.

The other point I would make is that to the extent that eating lunch has consequences at all, its probably more important to make sure the person you are trying to get to accept a deal has eaten rather than having eaten yourself. You want to make sure they are less likely to take offense at your offer.

Now two questions for Lab readers:

Do you find people more amenable to bad deals at lunch?