A Fair Share’s Brain Reward

Getting a decent deal activates the same reward centers of the brain as when people do drugs or win big. Christopher Intagliata reports.

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Podcast Transcript: But mommmmm, that’s not fair! Sound familiar? Even as children, we hate getting gypped, whether it’s fewer slices of pizza or lousy presents from Santa. More surprisingly, though, a team of neuroscientists at UCLA recently concluded that getting a fair deal feels good, because it activates the brain’s reward circuitry, just like lottery money and cocaine.

Participants were presented with offers to split a sum of money, like seven bucks out of 15. They almost always accepted 50/50 or 40/60 cuts, and these fair deals activated the brain’s reward areas, like the ventral striatum and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. But the lower the cut, the more participants turned up their noses. Seven of 15 ain’t bad—but seven of 23 seems like a rip-off.

Confronted with insulting offers, the reward circuit remained inactive. And what turned on was a region of the brain associated with disgust, called the insula. But when participants then swallowed their pride and accepted a meager share, the insula laid low and emotion-regulating areas of the brain switched on. Being cheated doesn’t feel good—but it’s better than nothing.

—Christopher Intagliata

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