"Retail therapy" is a term many women are more than familiar with -- the notion that the simple act of going shopping can be a panacea has been widely explored in pop culture. After all, how many times did Carrie Bradshaw buy shoes in order to soothe her dating scars in HBO's "Sex and the City?"

Certainly, the bowels of my closet are similarly littered with markers of my mental well-being. There's the Yumi Kim silk frock I picked up when a seemingly endless winter started getting to me. And, still boxed up in a corner are the shiny gray Pierre Hardy heels I bought while feeling grumpy -- ironically, because my feet hurt from rather impractical boots.

A growing number of researchers have been finding there is some truth behind the idea. And that the emotional well-being of shoppers can affect both their eagerness to buy and the prices they're willing to pay.

A study to be published in the June edition of Psychological Science magazine found that research subjects who viewed a "sad" video of a boy mourning the death of his father offered to pay four times as much for an item than those who were shown a "neutral" nature video.

"People can't and shouldn't go shopping when they feel down -- when we're feeling sad, we may be making really unwise decisions financially," says James Gross, an associate professor of psychology at Stanford University who co-authored the study with professors from Harvard University, Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh. "The short-term benefits might be offset by a longer-term cost if you get into debt and that might make you feel more down … and more likely to buy more stuff."

Research shows that people often do get a high from shopping -- the brain releases chemicals such as dopamine or serotonin when a person is stimulated by discovering something new, such as a handbag. Sometimes, aspects of the shopping experience such as friendly sales clerks, eye-catching displays or aisles that are easy to navigate can trigger brain activity that brings about these "euphoric moments," says Dr. David Lewis, director of neuroscience at Mindlab International, a United Kingdom-based consultancy whose clients include athletes, retailers and advertising companies. "The brain is turned on by novelty."
And such studies have gained prominence recently as more researchers have started documenting shopping addictions and compulsive buying. In 2006, a paper in the American Journal of Psychiatry noted that a survey of 2,500 adults showed that 6% of women and 5.5% of men displayed symptoms consistent with a compulsive buying disorder.

Dr. Lewis, who has conducted retail therapy studies on more than 300 subjects in 10 countries, monitored my shopping in two New York stores. Using a monitor to measure my heart-rate, a cap that recorded the electrical activity of my brain and sensors on my fingers to chart my skin's physical responses, Dr. Lewis tracked my responses over two 10-minute trips. His team also recorded every item I looked at with a camera affixed to a pair of eyeglass frames. In this experiment, we visited Intermix, a high-end boutique chain, and T.J. Maxx, which has commissioned a study by Dr. Lewis.

At T.J. Maxx, after getting over the feeling of looking like a lab rat, several brightly colored dresses and blouses in bubblegum pink and kelly green items caught my eye. In the handbag section, I picked up a shiny patent-leather bag with chain-link straps that reminded me of a Marc Jacobs purse I had coveted. Intermix was more enticing, with lots of the bright colors and metallic items that I prefer, but also much higher prices.

Dr. Lewis and his team then scanned the data, looking for spots where brain activity and heart-rate spiked at the same time to indicate a "moment of euphoria." At T.J. Maxx, this happened in six spots -- Dr. Lewis says his tests typically show three to eight spikes over 10 minutes. A few of these spikes were triggered by the bright-colored items I saw, occasionally followed by dips as I struggled to get the items off the crowded racks for a closer look. At Intermix, there were three big spikes -- once, when I wasn't even looking at a particular item. I had simply rounded a corner of the store and my heart started racing at the sight of a whole new aisle full of clothing to explore.

It was interesting to note that in both stores, many of the items that caused the spikes weren't items I had seriously considered buying or even trying on. On the flip side, several pieces that I did seriously think about purchasing -- and ended up trying on -- didn't inspire big spikes.

Dr. Lewis says retailers have used data such as this to alter store displays or layout as these can be as much of a factor as the merchandise in creating and sustaining a level of euphoria that is most likely to make a sale.

For the consumer, such studies serve as an important reminder that these euphoric moments do exist but they aren't necessarily triggered by the desire to own a particular item.

It's also important to remember, too, that these highs don't last very long -- but credit-card bills do.
Donna Hoffman, 54, a homemaker in Asheville, N.C., remembers checking out some tony stores in New York City to cheer herself up a few years ago. After briefly browsing in an antiques store, she dropped $400 on a magnifying glass on a whim. "I remember thinking even as I was walking home, 'Gee, why did I buy this?'" says Ms. Hoffman, who notes that the euphoria subsided by the time she got home. A few hours later, she returned it.

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