Humans Will Trade Pain for Useless Information

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People often go great lengths to earn a reward—no pain, no gain, as the saying goes. A new study published today in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B suggests that many will also go to great lengths for functionally worthless information, showing a willingness to endure physical pain for information about the value of a monetary reward, even when that information won’t affect its value.

“This study gives us a vivid new window to understand how we motivate ourselves to seek information about our future,” says Ethan Bromberg-Martin, a neuroscientist at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis who wasn’t involved in the study.

Between 2009 and 2015, Bromberg-Martin conducted a set of experiments involving macaque monkeys. He showed that monkeys who received rewards in return for performing a computer-based task in a laboratory were willing to sacrifice part of their reward payout (varying amounts of water) to learn what their future rewards would be—even though doing so made no difference to how much water they actually received in the long run.

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