Why do we buy the things we do? Many of us can’t wait to purchase the latest style or whatever it was we saw during the last commercial on television. Did you realize that what you buy is more related to what you think of yourself than what you really need?

Researchers have found that there is not just a relationship between low self-esteem and material values, but that one causes the other. A recent study shows that low self-esteem INCREASES materialism and materialism can CREATE low self-esteem. They also found that as an individual's self-esteem increases, their interest in materialism decreases.

In a study primarily focused on how this relationship effects children and adolescents, researchers found that even a simple gesture designed to raise self-esteem dramatically decreased materialism.

By the time children reach early adolescence and experience a decline in self-esteem, they fall into the use of material possessions as a way to cope with feelings of low self-worth. The worse teenagers feel about themselves, the more they rely on material items to make them feel better about themselves.

The happiest people surround themselves with family and friends, don't care about keeping up with the Joneses next door, lose themselves in daily activities and, most important, forgive easily.

In recent years, researchers have reported problems associated with getting and spending, damage to relationships and self-esteem, a heightened risk of depression and anxiety, less time for what the research indicates truly makes people happy, like family, friendship and engaging work. And maybe even headaches.
Consumer culture is continually bombarding us with the message that materialism will make us happy. What this research shows is that that's not true.

For people who are living paycheck to paycheck, more money unquestionably brings greater well-being. And for the comfortable, a raise or a new purchase can certainly feel good - for a little while, anyway. Also, economic research indicates that a hunger for money can motivate people to perform better and even more creatively.

When people turn to material things to feel better, they compound the problem, because they seek experiences that don't do a very good job of meeting their psychological needs.

Most of us want more income so we can consume more stuff. However, several separate studies show that as societies become richer, they do not become happier. Statistically people have more material possessions and money than they did fifty years ago, but they are actually less happy. In fact, the wealthiest countries have more depression, alcoholism and more crime than they did fifty years ago and yet we have more material goods to purchase than ever before. This statement is true of Britain, the United States, Australia, continental Europe and Japan.

The real reason people want whatever is currently "hot" or "in style" is because they believe it will contribute towards their satisfaction and happiness in life. Notice I said “believe”. People believe that buying more and more things, especially name brand clothes and cars, will make them happy, when in fact research has shown time and time again that this simply isn't the case.

When people spend their effort pursuing material goods in the belief that they will bring happiness, they're ignoring other, more effective routes to happiness.

The point here is if you believe that when you get enough "stuff" you will be happy, you are setting yourself up to be very disappointed. We all know that money doesn’t bring happiness. But yet we aren’t surprised when we (or our neighbor) goes on to covet a Porsche and a new home and tickets to the Super Bowl.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.