

How can we deal with *TOO MUCH CHOICE?*

Do you ever feel overwhelmed when you visit a grocery, department, or even convenience store? For example, in 2010, the average American supermarket carried 48,750 items, more than five times the number of items carried in 1975! And it's not just supermarkets either; this proliferation of choice can be seen everywhere, from jeans to undergraduate courses. It can be daunting, but there are strategies we can use to help make our selections easier.

The notion of more choice is often heralded as a good thing. And it can be. However, too much choice can hinder our productivity, happiness, and progress. It can also be debilitating beyond a certain point. The average person is faced with up to 70 choices per day, so we can spend a lot of time each day just making decisions! We are also bombarded with images and messages that say we can have it all and the opportunities are infinite, increasing the pressure on us to make that final choice.

In the famous "Jam" study undertaken by a Professor of Business at Columbia University, researchers set up a booth with a selection of jams. Every few hours they would switch the number of jams displayed from six to twenty-four, and vice versa. While the larger array drew more attention (60 percent stopped to peruse versus 40 percent), only 3% of those who stopped at the display of twenty-four actually purchased a jar, versus 30% of those who had stopped to look at the display of six.



Why is this? Research has suggested that human cognitive ability cannot efficiently compare more than five options. So, when we look at 24 jams, we might look at the first five and then stop. Thus, we are unable to engage in the elaborate thought process required to compare and contrast all available alternatives.

"Trop de choix tue la choix" (Too much choice kills the choice)

ISSUES THAT ARISE FROM AN “OVERABUNDANCE” OF CHOICE:

- **We can stress about making the “perfect” choice.** If we are looking to make the perfect choice, we can miss a suitable choice. Take dating, for example. With multiple apps and online dating sites, we have more potential mates at our disposal than ever before. In the quest for finding a perfect match, we can lose sight of a worthy choice right in front of us. Author Lori Gottlieb makes this case in her book “Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough” (2010).
- **We can worry about missed opportunities.** Research shows that an excess of choice often leads us to be less, not more, satisfied once we actually decide. There’s often that nagging feeling that we could have done better.
- **We can become paralyzed by an overload of options which can push us into decisions that are against our own best interest.** There is a risk of misunderstanding the available alternatives, making a selection on a moment’s whim, or making no selection at all.
- **We can stress about notion of taking responsibility for our choice.** With so many options available, we cannot “blame the company” for not providing enough choice, we can only blame ourselves for not selecting the right choice.

“Satisficers” versus “Maximizers”

How we can approach choice and not feel overwhelmed

Be a “satisficer” instead of a “maximizer”. In his well-known book, “The Paradox of Choice” Barry Schwartz explains that “maximizers” exhaustively scan all options until they find the “perfect” option, whereas “satisficers” articulate their preferences beforehand, study the options, and find a “good enough” choice that fits those preferences. People who strive for maximization are more prone to depression and perfectionism, more likely to compare themselves negatively with others and thus more prone to regret than those who use satisficing strategies.

Trust your gut and identify your needs. Knowing your needs leads to a healthy body and soul. Take time to tap into your emotions, and explore why you made the choices you did. Once you understand your motivations and intentions, it’s easier to make decisions that are in line with the kind of life you want to create, and the type of person you want to be.

Finally, approach the choice you have made with mindfulness, advises Schwartz. Live in the moment and enjoy the choice you have made. Own your decisions, and take responsibility for them.