

Armed with information, people make poor choices, study finds

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When faced with a choice that could yield either short-term satisfaction or longer-term benefits, people with complete information about the options generally go for the quick reward, according to new research from University of Texas at Austin psychologists.

The findings, available online in the journal *Judgment and [Decision Making](#)*, could help better explain the decisions [people](#) make on everything from eating right and exercising to spending more on environmentally friendly products.

"You'd think that with more [information](#) about your options, a person would make a better decision. Our study suggests the opposite," says Associate Professor Bradley Love, who conducted the research with graduate student Ross Otto. "To fully appreciate a long-term option, you have to choose it repeatedly and begin to feel the benefits."

As part of the study, 78 subjects were repeatedly given two options through a [computer program](#) that allowed them to accumulate points. For each choice, one option offered the subject more points. But choosing the other option could lead to more points further along in the experiment.

A small cash bonus was tied to the subjects' performance, providing an incentive to rack up more points during the 250 trial questions.

However, subjects who were given full and accurate information about

what they would have to give up in the short term to rack up points in the long term, chose the quick payoff more than twice as often as those who were given false information or no information about the rewards they would be giving up.

In a real-life scenario, a student who stayed home to study and then learned he had missed a fun party would be less likely to study next time in a similar situation — even if that option provides more long-term benefits.

"Basically, people have to stay away from thinking about the short-term pains and gains or they are sunk and, objectively, will end up worse off," says Love.

While psychologists have long studied how humans make choices, this is among the first research that examines how people measure "what could have been" when they make repeated decisions that affect their future state.

Love says he believes the long-term benefits of specific decisions can be reinforced by tangible rewards, such as a good grade, a raise or promotion, which can serve as markers of long-term success and help overcome short-term biases

"If there no were no conflict in our choices, this wouldn't be a problem. But everything has that conflict between short-term and long-term goals," says Love. "It's really hard for a learning system to disentangle what's good for you in the short term or long-term."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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