

# Psychology researcher finds that second-guessing one's decisions leads to unhappiness

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You're in search of a new coffee maker, and the simple quest becomes, well, an ordeal. After doing copious amounts of research and reading dozens of consumer reviews, you finally make a purchase, only to wonder: "Was this the right choice? Could I do better? What is the return policy?"

Reality check: Is this you?

If so, new research from Florida State University may shed some light on your inability to make a decision that you'll be happy with.

Joyce Ehrlinger, an assistant professor of psychology, has long been fascinated with individuals identified among [psychologists](#) as "maximizers." Maximizers tend to obsess over decisions — big or small — and then fret about their choices later. "Satisficers," on the other hand, tend to make a decision and then live with it.

Happily.

Of course, there are shades of gray. In fact, there's a whole continuum of ways people avoid commitment without really avoiding it.

Ehrlinger's latest research on decision making was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. The paper, "Failing to Commit: Maximizers Avoid Commitment in a Way That Contributes to Reduced Satisfaction," was co-authored with her graduate

student, doctoral candidate Erin Sparks, and colleague Richard Eibach, a [psychology](#) assistant professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. It examines whether "maximizers show less commitment to their choices than satisficers in a way that leaves them less satisfied with their choices."

The paper, based on two studies of Florida State undergraduate volunteers, finds that the maximizers' focus on finding the best option ultimately undermines their commitment to their final choices. As a result, the authors argue, "maximizers miss out on the psychological benefits of commitment," leaving them less satisfied than their more contented counterparts, the satisficers.

Past research into the differences between maximizers and satisficers looked at how the two groups made choices differently and, more importantly, how the process itself varied. Ehrlinger's research, however, looked at something else entirely: What happened after a choice was made?

"Because maximizers want to be certain they have made the right choice," the authors contend, "they are less likely to fully commit to a decision." And most likely, they are less happy in their everyday lives.

Whether being a maximizer is a central and stable part of the personality or simply a frame of mind remains unclear, but Ehrlinger hopes to isolate the cause of the behavior in future research.

"Current research is trying to understand whether they can change," she said. "High-level maximizers certainly cause themselves a lot of grief."

Over the years, Ehrlinger's scholarly research has led her to study self-perception and accuracy and error in self-judgment. Her latest research into the ways maximizers avoid commitment is important for several

reasons.

First, the differences between maximizers and satisficers may play a bigger role than previously thought in consumer decision making and purchasing. For example: "Maximizers get nervous when they see an 'All Sales Are Final' sign because it forces them to commit," Ehrlinger said.

Also, a maximizer's lack of contentment creates a lot of stress, so the trait could potentially have an enormous effect on health, Ehrlinger explained. It's not just coffee-maker purchases they stress over — and second-guess themselves about — it's also the big life decisions such as choosing a mate, buying a house or applying for a job.

Even after considerable deliberation before choosing a mate or a house, a high-level maximizer may still feel unhappy, even depressed, with his or her final decision.

"Identifying the 'right' choice can be a never-ending task (for a maximizer)," Ehrlinger and her co-authors write. "Feelings about which option is best can always change in the face of new information. Maximizers might be unable to fully embrace a choice because they cannot be absolutely certain they chose the best possible option."

Provided by Florida State University

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