

Too many choices -- good or bad -- can be mentally exhausting

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Each day, we are bombarded with options -- at the local coffee shop, at work, in stores or on the TV at home. Do you want a double-shot soy latte, a caramel macchiato or simply a tall house coffee for your morning pick-me-up? Having choices is typically thought of as a good thing. Maybe not, say researchers who found we are more fatigued and less productive when faced with a plethora of choices.

Researchers from several universities have determined that even though humans' ability to weigh choices is remarkably advantageous, it can also come with some serious liabilities. People faced with numerous choices, whether good or bad, find it difficult to stay focused enough to complete projects, handle daily tasks or even take their medicine.

These findings appear in the April issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which is published by the American Psychological Association.

Researchers conducted seven experiments involving 328 participants and 58 consumers at a shopping mall. In the laboratory experiments, some participants were asked to make choices about consumer products, college courses or class materials. Other participants did not have to make decisions but simply had to consider the options in front of them.

The scientists then asked each group to participate in one of two unpleasant tasks. Some were told to finish a healthy but ill-tasting drink (akin to taking one's medicine). Other participants were told to put their hands in ice water. The tasks were designed to test how the previous act of choosing, or not choosing, affected people's ability to stay on task and maintain behaviors aimed at reaching a goal.

Researchers found that the participants who earlier had made choices had more trouble staying

focused and finishing the disagreeable but goal-focused tasks compared to the participants who initially did not have to make choices.

In other experiments, participants were given math problems to practice for an upcoming test. The participants who had to make important choices involving coursework spent less time solving the math problems and more time engaging in other distractions such as playing video games or reading magazines, compared to participants who were not asked to make choices prior to that point. The participants who made choices also got more math problems wrong than participants not faced with decisions.

To further buttress their laboratory findings, the researchers conducted a field test at a shopping mall. The shoppers reported how much decision-making they had done while shopping that day and then were asked to solve simple arithmetic problems. The researchers found that the more choices the shoppers had made earlier in the day, the worse they performed on the math problems. The authors note they controlled for how long the participants had been shopping, and for several demographic categories such as age, race, ethnicity and gender.

Kathleen D. Vohs, PhD, the study's lead author and a member of the University of Minnesota's marketing department, concluded that making choices apparently depletes a precious resource within the human mind. "Maintaining one's focus while trying to solve problems or completing an unpleasant task was much harder for those who had made choices compared to those who had not," says Vohs. "This pattern was found in the laboratory, classroom and shopping mall. Having to make the choice was the key. It did not matter if the researchers told them to make choices, or if it was a spontaneously made choice, or if making the choice had consequences or not."

But what about making fun choices" How does that affect our mental acuity" In their last experiment, researchers determined that making a few enjoyable decisions, such as spending four minutes selecting items for a gift registry, was shown to be less mentally draining than when participants spent 12 minutes doing the same task. In other words, even if people are having fun making decisions, their cognitive functions are still being depleted with every choice they make.

Vohs says these experiments provide evidence that making choices, as opposed to just thinking about options, is what is especially taxing. "There is a significant shift in the mental programming that is made at the time of choosing, whether the person acts on it at that time or sometime in the future. Therefore, simply the act of choosing can cause mental fatigue," says Vohs. "Making choices can be difficult and taxing, and there is a personal price to choosing."

Source: American Psychological Association

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