

## Is an Over-Abundance Of Choices Depleting Your Day?

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In the mid-1980s movie, *Moscow on the Hudson*, actor Robin Williams portrays a Russian defector who settles in New York. He goes to the supermarket one day to buy some coffee. The markets he knew in Moscow were small, poorly lit, and ill-stocked. The Manhattan supermarket is dazzling. The display of coffee simply overwhelms him; there is instant, freeze dried, dark brew, flavored, Columbian, decaffeinated, and espresso in dozens of boxes, cans, and jars of different sizes and different colors. Suddenly confronted with a vast array of choices, he has an anxiety attack, faints, pitches forward, and ends up knocking over the whole display. His reaction is perfectly reasonable under the circumstances.

When I tell this story during my speeches, it invariably gets a chuckle or two. Yet, you and I are being besieged in the same way. Each day we suffer the same anxiety, often imperceptibly. In his 1969 book *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler predicted that we would become slaves to an overabundance of choices. Toffler described how more choices inhibit action, resulting in greater anxiety and the perception of less freedom and less time.

Having an abundance of choices seems a blessing -- a benefit of living in a capitalistic society. Like too much of everything else, however, having too many choices is harmful to your breathing space and results not only in increased time expenditure but also in a mounting form of exhaustion.

### The Mating Game

Often, too many choices lead to no selection at all. In one city after another, you hear the same lament among singles: "there are no eligible men in this town," or, "this town is a bust when it comes to women."

Today, however, if you're in search of a mate, or simply a date, the reality is that there have *never been more* potential partners for you, in every community, of either sex, at all ages. There are so many choices, that for some, choosing is all but impossible. For others, the mating process seems too burdensome in the face of everything else they're confronting.

What if you were forced to meet your future mate among a fixed population of 10,000 people in a small town nearby? Could you do it? You're darned right you could.

What if you *had* to confine your selection to those potential partners you already knew? Could you find someone with whom you could be happy? You probably could. So why can't you choose, then, among hundreds of thousands of people? Among a sea of excuses, the

predominant answer is too many choices.

Let's change the scene. Suppose you're stuck in a small beach town on a chilly Saturday afternoon when it starts pouring rain. You duck into the nearest building, the town library. The library is so tiny it only has one bookcase. You almost laugh.

For some reason, all the shelves except one are barren. That shelf contains six books. Although you're not familiar with any of them, you start thumbing through them. Now for the \$10 million lotto jackpot: somewhere among those six books, can you find a chapter that can hold your interest, an engrossing character, or a captivating passage? Of course you can.

Why, then, do you so often ignore the books on your shelf at home? You know, the ones you have been meaning to read for eight years? Too many choices of both books to read and other things to do could be the reason.

Periodically, the sweetest choice is choosing from what you already have, choosing to actually have what you've already chosen.

### **No Breaks**

Daily, each of us is confronted surreptitiously by the pressing, awesome responsibility to keep choosing. Rob gets up on Saturday morning at 8:45. His wife is a real estate agent and has already left to meet a client. Rob has a choice of five cereals and four coffees, breakfast at the fast food restaurant six blocks away, or not eating. After breakfast, Rob may go to his office in town to finish some work -- it would be nice to get a jump on Monday. Or, he may try to unplug a clogged sink. He'd call a plumber, but they want \$48 just to come over.

As he explores the kitchen shelves, Rob thinks about how he has not been to the health club in weeks and would like to swim. However, the first football game will be on at noon and he doesn't want to miss the kick-off. Settling for some cold cereal, Rob remembers that Dave, a co-worker, needs help moving this weekend. The newspaper contains a long feature article on a television actor who lost 24 lbs. in six weeks. Rob reads about two-thirds of the article, and then turns to another section. The closest mall is having a mall-wide sale, and it looks like it might be worth a ride over there. He reads a couple more items while finishing breakfast. Around 9:30, he decides to go the gym, but before getting ready, he notices the clogged sink and begins tinkering with it. Fifty minutes later, Rob is still puttering with the sink. The problem has worsened, and he gives up.

Frustrated, he heads for the gym, but hurries back so he does not miss the kick-off. He picks up his mail on the way. There are a few bills, some advertising fliers and, unsolicited,

a new credit card. He wonders, "Is this worth keeping?"

It is now noon on his first of two days off. Rob already feels a bit anxious. By Sunday night he'll be exhausted and won't know why. On Monday morning he will commute to work, anxious rather than rested, and only partially prepared to be productive.

Rob feels as if he is always behind. Is there a little of Rob in you? Or a lot? Amidst our multi-option society, even minor decisions hobble a surprising number of people. In one survey of 1,000 Americans, more than 50% had trouble *choosing a doctor, a vacation spot, or clothes from their closet* for a special occasion.

- The supermarket glut: Gorman's *New Product News* reports that in 1978 the typical supermarket carried 11,767 items. By 1987, that figure had risen to an astounding 24,531 items -- more than double the amount in just in nine years.
- More than 45,000 other products were introduced during those years, but failed.
- Elsewhere in the supermarket, Hallmark Cards now offers cards for *105* familial relationships.
- Currently, more than 1,260 varieties of shampoo are on the market. 75 different types of exercise shoes are now available, each with scores of variations in style and features.
- More than 2,000 skin care products are currently selling.

As more specialty foods, cuisines, dietary supplements and non-food items are introduced, the typical supermarket will soon carry 40,000 items. Will there be room? Yes. Each product line carried will occupy a lesser amount of shelf space.

No matter how many items the supermarket stocks, you can continue to buy what you have always bought, tuning out the rest. That could get a little tedious, you say? Do you like to try new things? Then, on each trip to the supermarket, make a goal of exploring one new area. It could be in the meats, fruits, cheeses, frozen foods, whatever. If you shop once a week, in the course of the next year, you will have tried at least 50 new products without expending mental effort or consternation in the process.

Toffler had it right when he advocated not engaging in low-level decisions. If the same toothbrush is available with a red, blue, yellow, or white handle, and it is all the same to you, grab the one that is closest or take the one that the clerk hands to you.

Whenever you catch yourself making a low-level decision, consider to yourself, "does this make a difference?" Get in the habit of making only a few decisions a day --the ones that count.

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