

## Choices can complicate task of making decisions

With so many choices, how do we make decisions we can live with?

By Jennifer Gish

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I mulled it for months. It was never the right time to make the break, and even if I did, was there really anything better for me out there?

I lay in bed at night considering the options, imagining the future, taking stock of my needs. Making the wrong choice would take time to undo. The decision involved so many options, and I was so knotted up about making a good choice that I made none.

And this was just about giving up cable.

This is America. We like freedom of choice. But somewhere along the line that translated into not being able to pick up a box of Cheerios without having to consider 172 varieties. We've been groomed for indecision by having to sift so many options for every little thing. And after settling the matter of Banana Nut vs.

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Multigrain (with protein!), having to make a call on big things — like whether to leave your job or a bad relationship — causes a panic

attack, and so we just stand still and stew. Thanks, General Mills. I used to be a confident decision-maker, then I shopped for breakfast cereal, and now I don't know who I am.

"It can be paralyzing. It really makes it difficult," says [Rachel Elahee](#), an Atlanta-based psychologist and author of "Choose You!: Reignite Your Passion for Life." "Everything has multiple choices, and there's so much more of everything that I think — particularly if you're over the age of 35 — it makes it even harder. We're not used to that many choices. There are choices everywhere. It will make your head spin if you don't have an anchor."

And I don't want my head to spin. I want to be the [Donald Trump](#) of decision-making — sure of myself, never looking back, unwavering. I want to shout "you're fired!" or "I want the Chocolate Cheerios! No, not the Dark Chocolate Multi-grain Crunch Cheerios, just the chocolate ones!" and never look back.

But the list of things that keep us from making decisions is as long as the cereal aisle. We fear we'll get it wrong. We don't really understand what we want. We don't want to put the brain power into that much rational evaluation. And so we study and don't decide. Or we go into work and pass off our tendency to defer to others as good collaboration.

"At the end of the day, we're very loss-averse. We don't like losses in our lives, and when you have lots of choices, you have to weigh those things in terms of costs and benefits," says [Christine Page](#), associate professor of marketing at [Skidmore College](#) in Saratoga Springs. One of the many studies that have been done around this subject involved a display of jams in a gourmet food store.

Page says some days the store would put out an assortment of 24 jams to sample, the other days the store would set out six sample jars. Whether there were 24 jars or six, people taste-tested the same number of jams. But they purchased more jam — more than 30 percent more jam — with the smaller display of samples. Limiting choices also limited the risk of buying the "wrong" ones.

It turns out, we're glass-half-empty thinkers. We'll focus on what we're losing by not choosing B or C, instead of what we're gaining with choice A, Page says. And being scared of missing out keeps us from opting for anything.

"If you cut the cord with your cable, you're thinking about 'I'm going to lose out on this,' " Page says. "We tend to do the safe thing."

That's hardly bold, Trump-like decision making. Good decision makers trust that they'll be OK even if the decision they make comes with some loss or perhaps even turns out to be a mistake. They've made enough good decisions to know that they can eventually overcome bad ones.

"Everything works out. Our indecisiveness over making the wrong choice? We put way too much weight on that," Elahee says. "There's no perfect choice. Everything has its drawbacks. You have to trust that whatever situation, based on your pick, your choice, you'll be able to deal with the consequences."

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