

THE PARADOX OF CHOICE: WHY MORE IS LESS

by Barry Schwartz

Summary & Worksheet

durmonski.com

The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

With the number of options constantly expanding on the horizon, we're becoming less and less satisfied with the products and services we choose to acquire. In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz observes in great depth this modern phenomenon. The tendency that more options is not only worsening our well-being but also one of the prime reasons we're feeling depressed and unsatisfied with our lives in the 21st century.

The Core Idea:

The illusion of control over our lives is successfully adopted by many people. Wherever we look, there's a huge pile of options we can choose from for almost anything we want nowadays. But while the opportunity to tailor your life the way you want seems fantastic, and actually realistic to most, the average person freezes when he's about to make a choice. After all, if the thing we pick turns out to be a disaster, we'll have no one but ourselves to blame for this bad faith.

Highlights:

- *We're bombarded by products in every industry. Paradoxically, the more options there are available, the less happy we feel.*
- *What we remember about an event governs our future choices about similar things.*
- *It's not about finding the best product there is. It's about finding a "good enough" item that's aligned with your standards.*

7 Key Lessons from The Paradox of Choice:

- *Lesson #1: We're Experiencing Choice Overload*
- *Lesson #2: We Shop More But Enjoy it Less*
- *Lesson #3: Memories and Expectations Govern Our Choices*
- *Lesson #4: Satisfaction Decreases When Gain Increases*
- *Lesson #5: Focus on Getting Good Enough Goods*
- *Lesson #6: Our Choices Reinforce Our Perception About Who We Are*
- *Lesson #7: Coping With The Increasing Options Requires Work*

Lesson #1: We're Experiencing Choice Overload

It's no longer easy to pick the right product.

After all, we're exposed to an avalanche of goods regardless of the industry we're observing.

That's how the book starts. With a detailed overview of the options we are exposed to nowadays.

The author explains how, until very recently, there was only one type of jeans to choose from. As you can imagine, this is no longer the case. We can now decide between a wide variety of options that all seem promising – easy fit, relaxed fit, skinny fit, carrot fit...

It seems that regular, in every industry, is out of the scene and replaced by near-perfect alternatives that in reality are only complicating our lives.

But the rich assortment of jeans is just an appetizer. Important decisions about what to get is a permanent topic of our daily lives nowadays.

We have supermarkets filled with goods. Aisles covered with different types of juices, shampoos, cereals, beverages, tech gizmos all over the shelves promising to make our lives better. But among all of these options knocking on our doors waiting for us to decide, the worse, I believe mentioned in the book, is the growing number of classes in universities.

It's amazing that we have so many career choices and options about what industry to get ourselves involved in. Yet, it's extremely hard to decide what to do, for the rest of your life, in this fragile age – a teenager.

Each newly produced option adds another dimension to the array of choices we have to make. This makes deciding on things not only time-consuming, but it also becomes a source of self-doubt, anxiety, and it makes our lives unbearable

“When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize.” Barry Schwartz

Lesson #2: We Shop More But Enjoy it Less

Why it's called The Paradox of Choice?

Simple: We want to shop. We shop often. We shop big. We evaluate and update our wish list even if we're not shopping. However, we feel paralyzed and even worse, stressed, when we actually need to pick a product.

According to the surveys quoted in the book, 93% of teenage girls say that shopping is their favorite activity. In contrast, working women and men are not finding this activity very favorable. They actually call it a burden.

Nonetheless, they remain regular consumers and visitors of big supermarkets.

Why shop when we're no longer enjoying this activity?

There are several reasons presented by the author in the book:

1. It's almost impossible to ignore the new products constantly appearing in the world. After all, regardless of where we physically go, we're constantly exposed to ads.
2. We're prone to look at what others have and compare ourselves to them. Naturally, this leads us to the nearest shopping mall with a credit card and a desire to get what our neighbors have.
3. We're victims of the phenomenon called, “tyranny of small decisions.” Since so many products exist, and we desire to pick the best possible option for our money, we tend to say stuff like, “Let's go to one more store.” Of course, this hypothetical visit to only one

store always leads us yet another store, and then another, etc. In the end, shopping becomes a hassle that crushes our welfare.

With so many products and so many stores, isn't it easy to find exactly what we want? And, since there are plenty of options regardless of the product we're trying to get, shouldn't shopping feel like we're going on a trip to wonderland?

Apparently, the answer is no.

The paradox comes from the following experiment shared in the book: Store A is offering 6 varieties of jam – all available for testing. Store B, in contrast, offers 24 varieties of jam, also available for testing. And while store B attracted a larger crowd, store A did better in terms of sales.

Schwartz writes: “Thirty percent of the people exposed to the small array of jams actually bought a jar; only 3 percent of those exposed to the large array of jams did so.”

We adore the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of options. However, when we're facing an array of options, all with their own unique qualities, and it's time to actually buy something, the decision-making process feels paralyzing. We start to question our decisions and, as mentioned in the book, “decide not to decide.”

Since we want the best product for our money, more choices make it almost impossible to successfully evaluate all available products, that's why we can't make an adequate decision. And, we don't decide on anything.

“... a large array of options may diminish the attractiveness of what people actually choose, the reason being that thinking about the attractions of some of the unchosen options detracts from the pleasure derived from the chosen one.” Barry Schwartz

Lesson #3: Memories and Expectations Govern Our Choices

Picking a product when you're walking around the shopping center should be easy, right?

You simply have to ask yourself, “What do I want?”

Although this seems like a simple question, it triggers an internal dialog in your head. You begin to evaluate the product, the choice you're about to make, unconsciously, based on several criteria all focused on

your feelings:

- Expected utility: Before we buy something, before we go on vacation, we set internal expectations about the future country we're going to visit or the product we're going to buy. These expectations are based on what we see in ads and what others say about these places.
- Experienced utility: During a show, a presentation, a meal, while you're placing cooked ingredients in your mouth, our brain assesses all the data and stores it based on how these experiences made us feel.
- Remembered utility: After we have experienced something, of course, we don't remember all of it, we store only pieces of what actually happened in our heads. Nonetheless, our future decisions about similar things will be based on what we remember. Even it's only parts of what actually happened.

Or in other words, in our head, "What do I want?" transforms into, "What I'm expecting to get?"

If your expectations, based in most cases on what you remember, are met after the experience, you'll do more of this thing in the future.

So it all comes down to what we remember then, right?

It seems so.

Sadly, as Barry Schwartz states, we're awful at remembering how experiences made us feel.

"... it seems that neither our predictions about how we will feel after an experience nor our memories of how we did feel during the experience are very accurate reflections of how we actually do feel while the experience is occurring." Barry Schwartz

Lesson #4: Satisfaction Decreases When Gain Increases

If you're already rich, each additional dollar added to your bank account will satisfy you less.

This is called the prospect theory. Coined by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Two names heavily mentioned throughout the whole book.

Let's unpack this theory.

Subjectively, we think that each extra dollar, experience, positive occurrence in our lives weights the same. Or in other words, if we get \$100 we'll get, hypothetically, 10 units of satisfaction. And, respectively, if we get \$200 we'll get equal units – i.e. 20.

However, the reality is different. We'll most probably, objectively, get say 18 unites of satisfaction if we get \$200 after first getting \$100.

“As the magnitude of the gain increases, the amount of additional satisfaction people get out of each additional unit decreases.” Barry Schwartz

Economists call this, “law of diminishing marginal utility.”

Basically, this theory explains what I mentioned earlier: As we get richer, each extra dollar added satisfies us less.

That's why we're risk avoiders. We'll rather have \$100 for sure than risking it to flip a coin and get \$200 if it comes up heads and nothing if it comes up tails.

If you're a marketer, you can easily exploit this vulnerability in our operating system. How? By simply labeling your products properly.

Here's an example:

“People seem to think that yogurt that is 95 percent fat free is a more healthful product than yogurt that has 5 percent fat, not realizing, apparently, that yogurt with 5 percent fat is 95 percent fat free.” Barry Schwartz

Lesson #5: Focus on Getting Good Enough Goods

According to Barry Schwartz, based on how we make decisions when we're about to purchase something, there are two types of people: maximizers and satisficers.

Maximizers, want the best. They desire the finest goods at the best possible price on the market. They are willing to visit all the stores within their approximate distance to ensure that what they are getting is the absolute best possible. This task, as you can tell, involves checking all possible alternative options.

The somehow opposite of the radical behavior mentioned above is to be a satisficer. These individuals settle for good enough. They don't travel to other countries to get the “best possible” item. They have certain standards and criteria which they follow when they shop.

When the item meets these standards, even if this happens in the very first store, the shopping is over. They don't worry their minds about possibly saving a couple of bucks.

To be a maximizer, seems more rational. After all, you get the finest products at the best possible price.

But when observed more closely, we can easily sense the unfavorable traits that come along with finding the "best" products.

If you choose to be a maximizer, along with wasting a large portion of your life comparing products, you'll also regularly experience regret after your purchases. A nagging feeling that maybe somewhere out there there's even a better product will make you dysfunctional and crush your spirit.

Instead of never being happy about what you do and what you choose, focus on being a near-perfect satisficer. Establish certain standards and follow them when making decisions. Also, remember that "good enough" is often better than "the best."

"Thus perfectionists, like maximizers, seek to achieve the best. But I think there is an important difference between them. While maximizers and perfectionists both have very high standards, I think that perfectionists have very high standards that they don't expect to meet, whereas maximizers have very high standards that they do expect to meet." Barry Schwartz

Lesson #6: Our Choices Reinforce Our Perception About Who We Are

One of the many perks of our modern society is the opportunity to choose who you want to be.

Thanks to the newly available tools, you can create a unique persona regardless of where you are in the world.

The tools available to us give us the opportunity to showcase our best abilities and distinguish us from the crowd.

What you wear, what you eat, everything you do, consume, and even share online reinforces your perception about yourself in one way or another.

You buy expensive goods not necessarily because you have extra money to spare, but because you want to tell yourself, and usually others,

things like, “I’m a rich!” Or, “I’m eccentric.”

Combined with comparison, the consistent flow of new products and updates appearing on the shelves of big stores creates a nagging feeling of incompleteness.

Since you want to be perceived as “rich”, “modern”, “cool”, or whatever, to satisfy this inner desire and to keep up with your image in front of others, you’re bound to continuously shop.

The result of this endless shopping is evident and surely negative. In addition to not having a penny in your bank account, the dose of joy you get from buying things will always be short-lived. After all, new and better products are always appearing.

Or in other words, the inability to cope with what’s trending will psychologically damage you.

The solution to this vicious cycle appears to be only one: Expose yourself less to new updates.

“When asked about what they regret most in the last six months, people tend to identify actions that didn’t meet expectations. But when asked about what they regret most when they look back on their lives as a whole, people tend to identify failures to act.” Barry Schwartz

Lesson #7: Coping With The Increasing Options Requires Work

Finally, after decades of living in caves and under trees, we achieved what our ancestors never could. Sadly, we are impaired.

The abundance of tools that make our lives easier, is, paradoxically, also choking us. We constantly feel depressed although we’re seemingly free to choose how our lives should unfold.

In the words of the author, “We are free to be the authors of our own lives, but we don’t know exactly what kind of lives we want to “write.”

Is there a way out of this devastating state of mind and a way into life-prosperity?

Yes. There are several steps mentioned in the book that offer a way out of the psychological distress caused mainly by the over flooding ocean of choice:

1. Choose when to choose: The process of choosing a better car or a better laptop is the main source of agony. To appear somehow superior to our peers, we aim to get the best. But we never get to this state because there are constantly better options appearing. To correct things, focus your time and energy only on really important choices and let other “lucrative” opportunities pass you by.
2. Be a chooser, not a picker: To be a picker, means to passively select things from what’s available. A chooser, on the other hand, reflects on what’s important for him and then, if it’s really needful, gets something that is in line with his goals.
3. Satisfice more and maximize less: In the era of unlimited options, maximizers suffer. They are never fully convinced that their decision was the best possible one. If you accept the “good enough” mantra, you’ll quickly increase your satisfaction.
4. Think about the opportunity costs: Opportunity costs represent the potential benefits an individual misses out on when choosing one alternative over another. It’s usually good to think about the alternatives. But the more we consider them, the less we’ll be satisfied. So, do your best to stick with what you always buy. Opportunities will always come and go but this doesn’t mean that you should seize them every time you see them.
5. Make your decisions nonreversible: The option to change our minds after a decision has been made adds an extra layer of complexity. If you fully accept your choice, especially in your marital relationship, you’ll focus your energy exactly where you should – improving the relationship, not second-guessing it.
6. Practice an “Attitude of Gratitude”: We adapt quite fast to everything that happens to us. As stated in the book, “When life is not too good, we think a lot about how it could be better. When life is going well, we tend not to think much about how it could be worse.” Regularly writing down on a notepad what you are grateful for will give you a sense of delight. A nice dose of inspiration to remind yourself what you already have instead of what you’re lacking.
7. Regret less: We tend to feel regret because we think that a decision we have neglected in the past would have changed our future for the better. That’s hardly the case though. A single decision will (almost) never make a huge impact over the course of our whole existence. Instead of regretting past opportunities, focus on future ones.
8. Anticipate adaptation: What happens when you get a new car or a brand new video game? You’re beyond excited and you can’t wait to tell the whole world about it. How do you feel after a couple of weeks about these same things? Not that exhilarating, right? We easily adapt to nice things. And this is something you have to consider before obsessing about getting something new.
9. Control expectations: When not met, expectations lead to feelings of sadness and despair. Instead of allowing disappointment to rule your life, lower your expectations by reducing the number of options you consider and focus on being a satisficer.

10. Curtail social comparison: We're surrounded by media that's constantly informing us how others are doing. Though it's useful to see how we're doing compared to others, the downside of this cross reference is mostly negative. The only way you can be actually satisfied with your life is by focusing on what makes you happy, not what others label as happiness.
11. Learn to love constraints: Imposing limits, especially in the current setting, is no longer a disadvantage, it's a blessing. Limitless possibilities sounds good but actually feels devastating. By creating your own set of rules in our open world you'll create time for the things you consider important.

Actionable Notes:

- Broaden your worldview: We give disproportionate weight to the things we encounter. Or to be more precise, we focus and choose things that are more available to our memory. This is called the availability heuristic. If you constantly expose yourself to nuanced information about the same thing, you'll steer towards a particular decision every time – most probably not the best conclusion. Or to say it differently, you'll be biased. In contrast, if you allow yourself to frequently go through different sources of information, you'll make better predictions about the future and increase your chances of making the correct choice – again, in the future.
- Avoid social comparison: People who consider themselves happy are relatively unaffected by comparing themselves with others. Actually, seeing the advancement of others can even positively affect them and motivate them to work harder. In contrast, people who regularly feel down will translate the achievements of their peers as threatening to their persona. Of course, happiness is something subjective and usually brief. If you feel like you're lagging behind every time you see how others win, it's a good idea to skip the modern social media channels where people only showcase their highlights.
- Focus on "good enough": As described above, we're either maximizers or satisficers. We either settle for the ultimate best or we agree to the "good enough" product. For most, the latter feels insulting. "Good enough" in the age of innovation feels like we're not taking full advantage of what's available. But that's not entirely true. When there are new products appearing nearly every second, it's hard to get the ultimate best. After all, the newer version of what you bought will likely appear in the next couple of months. Thus, feelings of dissatisfaction and regret will follow along. Instead of looking for the best, correct your standards and focus on getting the "good enough."
- Create your own standards: We're strictly following commands when we're doing our jobs to earn money. However, when the time

comes to spend them, we don't obey any rules. When we shop, our main goal is to add a glimpse of joy to our lives. Even if it's for a brief moment. This strategy is dysfunctioning our future. Since the range of choices increases exponentially, it's not only dangerous to enter a store without a clear guide, it's becoming mandatory. Set some rules for yourself. Impose limits on the amount of money you're allowed to spend on, say, a new car. These self-regulations will not only make shopping easier, and save you money, but they will also give you back the control over your mind.

- “What do I want?”: We ask ourselves this question a lot during our days. It's a simple question that shouldn't take long for you to answer, right? Sadly, that's not the case. The avalanche of options we're daily exposed to is complicating things. But the problem doesn't emerge from the ever-increasing units in stores, it comes from our inability to come up with a good answer to the question for ourselves. We think we want more options and more opportunities but in reality, we lean towards what's familiar and what's near our persona. That's why, the question shouldn't be, “What do I want?” Your exploration should start from, “Who am I?” Once we know, we'll finally find out what we really want. Thus, neglect all the things we don't need and don't actually matter.

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

Narrow your choices. Avoid social comparison. Focus on getting “good enough” things.

These are the main rules you need to follow in the 21st century.

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz visualizes how our lives are controlled by the ever-expanding pile of options. How our minds are shutting off when faced with a gazillion of variations and how we're feeling less and less satisfied with what products we allow in our lives.

Most notably, Barry Schwartz explains how, since everything is practically created and available, we're responsible if we don't succeed. After all, there is a tool nowadays for everything. So, if we're still lacking a big house and a nice car, if we're still not feeling awfully amazing, this means that we failed somewhere along the way. That our choice of career or who we married was not the best pick.

Knowing these insights, we usually choose not to choose in terms of doing a positive change in our lives. Instead of admitting that we failed somewhere along the way, and doing something about this, we fill our heads with pleasant stories. We hide from the world, and we settle for being passive consumers. Hoping, that more things will lead to more happiness. Alas, this never happens.

Acquiring more things leads to an annoying desire to get even more. It's a never-ending cycle. Liberation can only emerge from controlling your expectations and the number of options you expose yourself to.

The key takeaway:

Curing yourself of personal misery caused by the pursuit of the “perfect life” is possible only if you lower your expectations and allow yourself to fail without regret.

Notable Quotes:

“Learning to choose is hard. Learning to choose well is harder. And learning to choose well in a world of unlimited possibilities is harder still, perhaps too hard.” Barry Schwartz

“We get what we say we want, only to discover that what we want doesn't satisfy us to the degree that we expect.” Barry Schwartz

“Because of adaptation, enthusiasm about positive experiences doesn't sustain itself. And what's worse, people seem generally unable to anticipate that this process of adaptation will take place. The waning of pleasure or enjoyment over time always seems to come as an unpleasant surprise.” Barry Schwartz

What to read next:

- Actionable [Book Summary: Thinking in Bets](#) by Annie Duke
- Actionable [Book Summary: René Girard's Mimetic Theory](#) by Wolfgang Palaver
- Actionable [Book Summary: Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol S. Dweck

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

1. *To avoid the availability heuristic find different sources of info in your field:*

2. *What you can do to avoid comparing yourself to others?*

3. *Are you searching for the "best" products or "good enough" is enough for you?*

4. *Create your own set of standards and follow them when you're shopping:*

5. *To answer, "What do I want?" ask yourself, "Who am I?"*

Don't forget to save your changes.