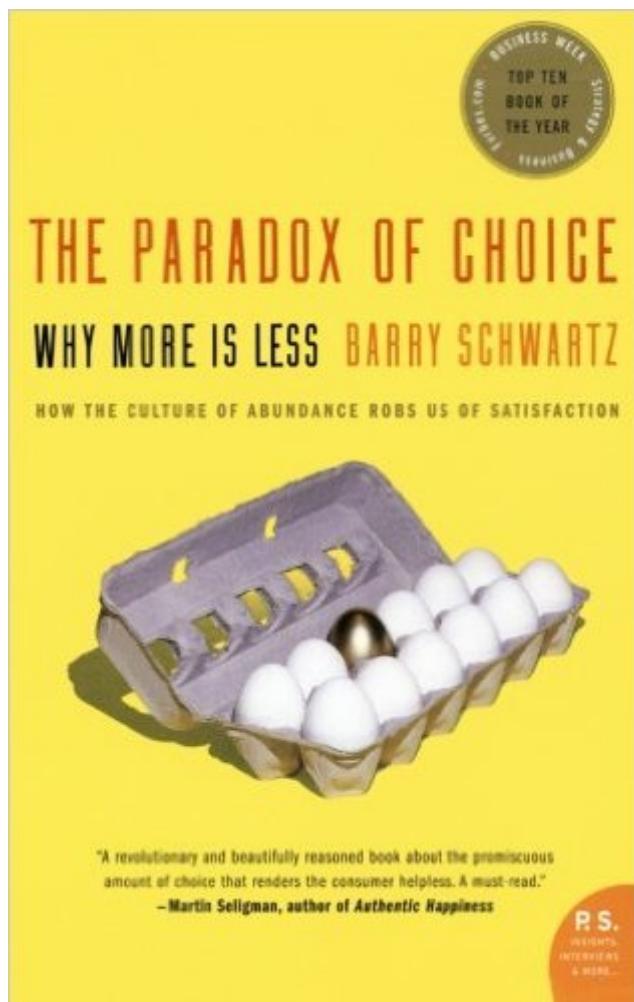


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# The Paradox Of Choice: Why More Is Less



## Synopsis

Whether we're buying a pair of jeans, ordering a cup of coffee, selecting a long-distance carrier, applying to college, choosing a doctor, or setting up a 401(k), everyday decisions "both big and small" have become increasingly complex due to the overwhelming abundance of choice with which we are presented. As Americans, we assume that more choice means better options and greater satisfaction. But beware of excessive choice: choice overload can make you question the decisions you make before you even make them, it can set you up for unrealistically high expectations, and it can make you blame yourself for any and all failures. In the long run, this can lead to decision-making paralysis, anxiety, and perpetual stress. And, in a culture that tells us that there is no excuse for falling short of perfection when your options are limitless, too much choice can lead to clinical depression. In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz explains at what point choice "the hallmark of individual freedom and self-determination that we so cherish" becomes detrimental to our psychological and emotional well-being. In accessible, engaging, and anecdotal prose, Schwartz shows how the dramatic explosion in choice "from the mundane to the profound challenges of balancing career, family, and individual needs" has paradoxically become a problem instead of a solution. Schwartz also shows how our obsession with choice encourages us to seek that which makes us feel worse. By synthesizing current research in the social sciences, Schwartz makes the counter intuitive case that eliminating choices can greatly reduce the stress, anxiety, and busyness of our lives. He offers eleven practical steps on how to limit choices to a manageable number, have the discipline to focus on those that are important and ignore the rest, and ultimately derive greater satisfaction from the choices you have to make.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an eye-opening book -- it brings the clarity and insight into decision-making that The Tipping Point did for trends. I have seen Barry Schwartz interviewed on TV and listened to a radio interview regarding this book. These interviews focused a lot on decision-making in things like shopping, and how having more choices actually makes shopping harder and makes everyone dislike the process more. I think "Paradox of Choice" does bring insight into shopping, but its range is actually much wider than that. Schwartz discusses people making difficult decisions about jobs, families, where to live, whether to have children, how to spend recreational time, choosing colleges, etc. He talks about why making these decisions today is much harder than it was 30 years ago, and he offers many practical suggestions for how to address decision-making so that it creates less stress and more happiness. He even discusses how so much additional choice affects children, and how parents can help make childhood (particularly young childhood) less stressful. There are two other factors about this book that really made it great for me. The first is that Schwartz is a serious academic (although his writing isn't dense in any way at all) -- so he talks about studies that back up his assertions in every facet of his argument. He describes the studies in a very lively way, so that they really come to life, and we can understand how they relate to the issue at hand. And, importantly, we then realize that his discussion is really founded on the latest and most advanced research into decision-making. This is not some self-help guru with a half-baked idea spouting off.

Unfortunately, I came to this book a bit late. And even more unfortunately, I read Daniel Gilbert's breezily engaging "Stumbling On Happiness" before taking this one in. I say that because - though I found "The Paradox of Choice" to be a solid and effectively-argued treatise on the very modern problem of consumer inundation - there is an almost-overwhelming amount of overlapping studies from that book to this one. Need proof? Well, be careful what you wish for! Because I, obsessive nerd that I am, actually kept track. The repeated studies are as follows (and please feel free to skip this paragraph if you haven't read "Stumbling"): the unpleasant noise/colonoscopy "peak end" experiment (pp. 49-50, paperback edition); the college student snack-picking survey (p. 51), the 3rd letter/1st letter demonstration of the availability heuristic (page 58); the \$100 coin flip risk assessment analysis (p.65); the \$20 concert ticket example of "sunk costs" (pp.70-3); the "experience sampling method" (p.106); trade offs involving new car options (p.124), the picture

choosing study (p.138); the lottery/quadruplegic examples of hedonic temperature on p.170. And I could go on (really!), but I think I'll spare you (and me) the trouble. Suffice it to say, if you read "Stumbling on Happiness," you will find a lot of repeat material here. And you may find that frustrating, as I sometimes did. If you're still interested in the ideas (and solutions) presented in this book, I recommend you pick it up in the library and just read chapters 4 and 11, which for all practical purposes can serve as a condensed version of the entire work.

I remember reading about ten or twelve years ago of Russian immigrants to America who were overwhelmed by the choices in the average supermarket. Accustomed to a choice of cereal or no cereal, they became paralyzed when confronted with flakes, puffs, pops, sugared or not, oat, wheat, corn, rice, hot or cold, and on and on. Now, according to Barry Schwartz, we are all overwhelmed by too many choices. No one is immune, he says. Even if someone doesn't care about clothes or restaurants, he might care very much about TV channels or books. And these are just the relatively unimportant kinds of choices. Which cookie or pair of jeans we choose doesn't really matter very much. Which health care plan or which university we choose matters quite a lot. How do different people deal with making decisions? Schwartz analyzes from every angle how people make choices. He divides people into two groups, Maximizers and Satisficers, to describe how some people try to make the best possible choice out of an increasing number of options, while others just settle for the first choice that meets their standards. (I think he should have held out for a better choice of word than "satisficer.") I was a bit disappointed that Schwartz dismissed the voluntary simplicity movement so quickly. They have covered this ground and found practical ways of dealing with an overabundance of choice. Instead of exploring their findings, Schwartz picked up a copy of *Real Simple* magazine, and found it was all about advertising. If he had picked up a copy of *The Overspent American* by Juliet Schor or *Your Money or Your Life* by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin instead, he might have found some genuine discussion of simple living rather than Madison Avenue's exploitation of it.

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