

# No comfort in comfort foods during tough economic times, study finds

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Most of us can name our favorite "comfort foods" and believe that we are most prone to seek them out during times of stress and upheaval -- like moving to a new town or starting (or ending!) a job. Contrary to this well-engrained belief, this research shows the surprising result that our choices of old favorites happen at the opposite times that we predict.

The data here show that when peoples' lives are characterized by high levels of change and upheaval, they are less likely to choose favorite "comfort" choices and more likely to choose new, unfamiliar products... even though they predict just the opposite! This common mis-prediction can lead to negative consequences for consumers in that it suggests people may choose the wrong timing for making positive new changes in one's life.

## **What are comfort foods and when do we choose them?**

Comfort foods are often satisfyingly high-calorie fare, but typically our comfort foods reflect a deeper nostalgic familiarity—comfort foods are those that we have a long history with, whether it is an old family recipe for meatloaf or a long-time favorite treat from a particular restaurant. And one can argue that the comfort food practice goes far beyond food. Consumers may believe that they are more likely to rent favorite movies, listen to familiar music, and stick with engrained consumption habits (e.g., smoking, a daily latte) when they are otherwise surrounded by

many new or changing environmental factors. In this research, this commonly held intuition or "lay theory" is examined, asking, "Do we really favor familiar things in times of change?"

## **Choice of comfort foods is opposite what we predict**

Several studies investigated this question. In a prediction study, participants were told about a person who was described either as being in a very stable life situation or in the midst of many changes. Participants were then asked to predict whether this person would choose either a highly familiar or unfamiliar version of a similar snack (a very popular and well-liked American potato chip in familiar flavors or an unknown British potato "crisp" in exotic flavors like Camembert and Plum). Participants predicted that the stable person would choose the exotic unfamiliar crisp and the person in a state of change would choose the familiar chip. They explained their predictions by saying that the stable person would have more time and energy to try new things and the person experiencing change would be more interested in choosing a known or "sure thing" option. However, in a separate choice study, participants were asked to rate the level of change and upheaval in their own lives and then, in a later task, given the opportunity to choose either the familiar American chip or the unfamiliar British crisp. Opposite to the predictions, participants who were experiencing more change were less likely to choose the old familiar favorite and more likely to choose the new and unfamiliar option. Thus, this result is called the "comfort food fallacy" effect. It does not say that comfort foods are not enjoyable, but rather that we don't seem to seek them out when we think we do. Contrary to our expectations, comfort foods appear to be chosen more often in comfortable times.

## **The result extends beyond food**

This choice study was repeated with non-food options (such as downloading songs from favorite artists versus new artists or watching a favorite movie versus a new and not previously seen movie). The results again show the same comfort food fallacy effect—people experiencing more change were less likely to choose old favorites.

## **Choice of new options can be increased by increasing perceived change**

A final study investigated whether it was possible to influence peoples' choices of familiar favorites versus new options. The results show that by manipulating the perceived level of change in a person's life, the likelihood of choosing a new option was also manipulated. Participants were asked to list either eight big changes in their lives or two big changes. Participants who listed more changes were subsequently more likely to choose the unfamiliar new option versus the old favorite option. Further, this study showed that the effect did not depend on whether the big changes listed by the participants were positive or negative—the effect happened in both cases.

## **Implications for consumer welfare**

What does this mean for consumers? First, it suggests the fallacy of our "lay theory" of comfort food. When we actively choose comfort foods (or other comfortable things) they may indeed feel good. But this research shows that we are wrong when we think we always seek out old comfortable favorites in times of change and upheaval. Rather, the studies show that we are automatically more open to new options in times of change and upheaval. In states of change, we may find ourselves in a "change mindset," automatically more attuned to new options in our environment. It may be that this occurs for two reasons: first, big changes often necessitate new choices and we may, therefore, pay more

attention to new options in general and, second, big changes often break the old habitual cues that tied us to familiar choices or actions.

If change begets change, as this research suggests, then one implication of this work is that it suggests when we will be most successful in adopting positive new changes. Many people believe that they shouldn't try too many new things at once. For example they may believe that a time of change is not a good time to start a new exercise program or try other new things, thinking instead to wait until they "settle in." This research suggests that a time of change (new job, new town, new situation) may be an ideal time to adopt desired changes because we are inherently more open to new options then. Times of change and upheaval may also be surprisingly good times to break away from unhealthy comforts like smoking or junk food. Recognizing the comfort food fallacy may help us better manage the positive new changes we make in our lives.

Source: Carnegie Communications

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