

Comfort food fallacy: Upheaval leads to less-familiar choices

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You'd think in times of uncertainty, people would gravitate toward familiar favorites. But a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that stress and upheaval actually lead people to choose less-familiar foods over "comfort foods."

"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," writes author Stacy Wood (University of South Carolina). "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."

In the first study, participants were told about a person who was described as either being in an extremely stable life situation or in the midst of many changes. Researchers asked them to predict whether these people would choose a popular American potato chip or an unknown British potato "crisp" in exotic flavors like Camembert and Plum. The participants thought the stable person would have more time and energy to try new things and would choose the new item.

Then in a separate choice study, researchers asked participants to rate the level of change in their own lives and then to choose snacks. Those experiencing more change chose the newer snacks. "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 results also carried over to non-food options, such as song downloads and movies. And, in a final study, the author found that by manipulating the perceived level of change in a person's life, the likelihood of choosing a new item was also manipulated.

The study has broad implications for people contemplating life changes. "Many people believe 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. 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," Wood concludes.

More information: Stacy Wood. "The [Comfort Food](#) Fallacy: Avoiding Old Favorites in Times of Change." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): April 2010 (published online September 8, 2009).

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