

'What shall we have for dinner?' Choice overload is a real problem, but these tips will make your life easier

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's been a long day. Your partner messages you: "let's just order in, I don't feel like cooking."

With a sense of relief, you open your usual takeaway app and start

scrolling through the many restaurants and dishes available. Thai, pizza, burgers, Korean, Lebanese... oooh this one has free delivery! Hmm, but they're far away and I am famished... Soon that sense of relief is replaced by overwhelm and inability to decide what to order. And your partner is not much help either!

Sound familiar? What you are experiencing is called [choice overload](#). This can sometimes go as far as leading to complete [decision paralysis](#) (when you give up and make a toastie instead) and ultimately leads to an overall reduced satisfaction with the choices we make.

Thankfully, marketing and psychology scholars have studied this phenomenon for years and can provide tips to make your life a little easier. But first, we need to understand it to fix it.

Where does choice overload come from?

In the dinner scenario above, "[choice set complexity](#)"—how choices are presented, how many options there are, how different the options are in their characteristics, how much we already know about each option—is the culprit.

There are simply too many things to consider to make the most optimal choice: cuisine, delivery time, delivery costs, distance, healthy or indulgent, and so on. What seems a simple decision at first glance, soon turns into quite a complex one.

With people making approximately [200 choices](#) a day when it comes to food alone, you can easily relate to the fatigue our brains feel at the end of a day.

Being presented with yet another complex and multifaceted decision will lead to [cognitive overload](#): it means your [brain](#) simply doesn't have the

cognitive resources (brain power) to consciously process all the options and consider all the information needed to make an optimal choice.

Why making 'perfect' decisions is impossible

As a matter of fact, [our brains are rather limited](#) in the amount of information they can process consciously at any given time.

Especially if a scenario is combined with high [decision task difficulty](#)—when there are [time constraints](#) (kids need to be in bed soon), we are likely to be held accountable (buying a wine for dinner at our boss' rather than for ourselves), or potential losses are significant (buying a house)—it is no wonder the brain blows a fuse trying to make the most optimal decision.

And therein lies the problem and the solution: you don't always have to make the optimal choice. What's wrong with "good enough"?

[Expectation-disconfirmation](#)—the [expectation](#) that the perfect choice must exist if so much choice is available to you—is seated in the idea that people tend to want to *optimize* results, rather than *satisfice*. It is like striving for happiness in life rather than contentment.

Especially perfectionists will find this often explains their [choice overload](#).

Another reason you may experience choice overload is because you explicitly don't want to put effort into making the decision. This is called [minimizing of cognitive demand goals](#) (for example, forfeiting deciding what to cook to ordering take out).

How to overcome choice overload

So after a long day, when you have no energy left, accountability is low, and the potential consequences are minor, consider satisficing your choice:

- **reduce the choice task to a binary one immediately.** Only give yourself the choice of two options, randomly chosen, or the first that came to mind. For example, before you open a delivery app, decide you have to choose between the first two cuisines that pop up.
- **stick with what you know.** [Habits are created](#) when a choice was marked as a rewarding one by the brain in the past. This means the choices you make regularly are good ones according to yourself, the expert! In your app, navigate to your favorites section and pick one from there.
- **stick with your first choice.** Don't waiver. Once you've decided, commit to your decision. Do you really want to spend all that time and effort reanalyzing and going back and forth when the result is of minor consequence?

Satisficing may not work for everything

Of course, not all choices are without grave consequences. When you are buying a house, you do want to consider all information needed to make an optimal decision.

Choice overload is likely because your brain is trying to connect all the dots consciously. So what do you do then?

If the decision is becoming overwhelming, try to pause and do some "[unconscious thinking](#)". When you get back to it after a good night's

sleep, your brain will have processed the information unconsciously and you will be able to make a more confident decision.

You know when people say "it just felt like the right choice"? [Intuition is not some mythical creature](#) whispering in your ear—it's your unconscious mind having been able to connect the dots.

Perhaps a cold comfort, but [choice deprivation](#) has far greater consequences for our well-being than choice overload. Dissatisfaction with choices made is much higher when we are deprived of sufficient choices than when we have too many.

With a few simple tricks, even the luxury problem of what to order for dinner can be eliminated; now, you have some brain space left to agree on what to watch on Netflix as you dig into your pizza... or laksa.

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