

# How to make the RIGHT DECISION EVERY TIME

We've never had so many choices as we do today. Good thing or bad thing? You decide



**W**hat was the last decision you made? Perhaps it was whether to walk or take the bus? Maybe it was more challenging: fixed rate mortgage or tracker? The reality is we make 35,000 decisions a day, say researchers at Cornell University, and 200 of those concern food alone. 'We're making subconscious decisions all the time. When we're driving or crossing the road, for example, our brains are in decision mode,' says cognitive behavioural

hypnotherapist Avy Joseph (avyjoseph.com). Making a decision involves weighing up the options and tapping into past experiences - all in a matter of seconds. 'Being conscious of that process all the time would be mentally exhausting,' says Joseph. But whilst our brains are assessing life and death decisions each time we step off the curb, it's conscious choices we find most challenging. In their book *Undecided* (£9.99, Avalon), authors Barbara and Shannon Kelley say women are 'paralysed

by indecision' due to the limitless lifestyle options available today. Oliver Burkeman (oliverburkeman.com), *Guardian* columnist and author of *Help!* (£12.99, Canongate), says it's not just women suffering. 'Research shows that limitless options are making us all miserable,' says Oliver. Is less choice the answer? Hell, no. After all, one woman's frappuccino infused with a shot of mint is another's skinny mocha latte. Instead, we need to learn some tricks to whittle our options down and become decision-smart.

WORDS: JAI BREITNAUER PHOTO: GETTY

**1 TAKE RISKS**  
 'Research suggests we're more likely to regret actions we don't take than ones we do,' says Burkeman. 'You learn from poor choices, but if you miss a chance you could waste years wondering "What if?"' Barbara Kelley calls this 'opportunity cost'. 'Choosing to do A means you can't do B, and we grieve for what we've given up rather than what we have,' she says. Try taking a risk and see what happens.

**2 AVOID ENVY**  
 Ever decided to do something just because your mates are? 'How often are the goals we shoot for (marriage, babies) honestly what we want for our lives?' asks Shannon Kelley, who says we often assume we want something because everyone else does. Laura East, 40, from Coventry knows this all too well. 'I was saving to go travelling when my sister bought a flat,' she says. 'Suddenly I wanted the same. I've always regretted not taking a career break in South America, and the tragedy is, my sister said she felt the same.' The lesson? Don't be seduced by a friend's 'perfect life'. Be true to your own desires.

**3 CUT YOUR TIME**  
 'I spend 99% of decision-making time swinging between my options and always end up making a snap decision at the end,' says Burkeman. So why draw it out? 'Now, I carry an egg timer with me. I have four minutes to make a decision, then I move on.' A study by the University of Twente in Holland recommends making decisions on a full bladder - and not just so you can get to the loo quicker. It's based on 'embodied cognition', the concept that the body can influence mental processes. Participants were offered £10 tomorrow or

£18 in 35 days' time. Those with a full bladder chose the £18 every time, which shows that if you are holding your bladder, you can exercise self-restraint mentally, too.

**4 FIND CLARITY**  
 'The rational brain can only hold seven things in working memory,' says Barbara Kelley. 'More often than not, it throws up its hands and lets the emotional brain take over.' But what does your emotional brain really want? That's the

dissatisfied with your choice, or don't choose at all. 'If I'm given a big menu, I get a sinking feeling rather than a sense of excitement,' says Helen Wright, 34, from Bristol. This is due to 'decision fatigue'. A 2008 study by the University of Minnesota showed that the more choices you have, the more exhausted you become. 'You need to artificially limit your choices,' says Burkeman. 'If choosing a restaurant, ask your partner to pick five. You pick three from the list and he picks the final one.'

*Once you realise that perfection does not exist and you can't have it all at the same time, it takes the pressure off your decision*

clarity we can struggle to find. Studies demonstrate that, faced with too many options, even the simplest of decisions can be unbearable. And now that we not only have shopping centres but the whole of the internet at our disposal, it's harder to be clear about what we want. But Burkeman has a trick to help filter out the background noise. 'Flip a coin, but before you look at it, ask yourself what you want the outcome to be,' he says. 'We've all had that sinking feeling when we realise it's heads and we actually wanted tails. But what the coin says is irrelevant; it's about forcing yourself to admit preference.'

**5 LIMIT CHOICES**  
 In a world where Starbucks offer 87,000 drink combinations (probably!), you'd assume the right product for you is out there. Wrong, says Barry Schwartz, author of *The Paradox of Choice* (£8.99, HarperCollins). Faced with too much choice, you make poor decisions, are

That way you have choice, but it's not endless.' And if a choice is still causing anxiety, eliminate it altogether. 'If you can't decide what to watch, switch off the TV and read a book instead,' he says.

**6 IT'S GOOD TO TALK**  
 According to researchers at UCL, a problem shared really is a problem halved. They found that when decisions were discussed, better choices were usually made than when an individual approached a problem alone. Use others to reassure your doubts or even cut to the chase if your emotions are preventing a decision. It may seem that decisions are easier for others, but often they've experienced the same turmoil. 'Someone said to me that we compare our insides to everyone else's outsides,' says Burkeman. 'We forget we have privileged access to our own mental and emotional process, and when we look at others we just see the final product.'

**7 FORGET PERFECTION**  
 A study by Columbia University Graduate School of Business found that consumers offered just six types of jam were more likely to buy a product than if they were offered 24. This is because with fewer options, we focus less on making the perfect choice. 'Anxiety holds us back,' says Joseph. We put pressure on ourselves to make the 'right' choice, but if you remove the idea of a correct answer, decisions are not so overwhelming. 'Realise perfection does not exist, nor can we have it all, at least not all at the same time,' says Barbara Kelley. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if you are offered 24 types of jam - chances are they all taste much the same. ■

## DECISION TIME: THINK YOU HAVE TO MAKE A TOUGH CALL? These famous films will help you put it into perspective...

- 1. 12 Angry Men** In reaching a decision in a murder trial, the 12 jurors in this courtroom drama end up learning more about themselves and how their own prejudices colour their view of the world.
- 2. The Notebook** Based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks, this classic love story explores the heart-rending decision of

Rachel McAdams' character, Allie, of whether to leave her fiancé for her first love, Noah, played by Ryan Gosling.

- 3. The Dilemma** In this comedy drama, Ronny, played by Vince Vaughn, grapples with the agonising decision of whether to tell his best friend that his wife is having an affair.