



# The choice is yours

*How understanding decision-making styles can improve wellbeing*

According to various sources, the average person makes 35,000 decisions a day. These choices affect their existence in many ways, from determining how they spend the next hour to influencing the course of the rest of their life. So, it's unsurprising that refining decision-making skills is a big topic in the field of self-improvement. To make more effective choices, however, it's necessary to understand innate processing tendencies. A framework for doing this, known as the maximiser-versus-satisficer theory, can shed light on how different people come to decisions. Much like the concept of extrovert versus introvert, it's a good starting point for self-reflection and can help you become more familiar with how your mind works.

## Perfect vs good enough

US Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert A Simon coined 'satisficing' – a portmanteau of 'satisfying' and 'sufficing' – in his 1956 paper, *Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment*. He went on to write about maximising and satisficing, introducing a framework that has been used by psychologists, behavioural scientists and coaches ever since. The theory highlights two approaches to decision-making that sit either end of a sliding scale. Maximisers tend to analyse a decision extensively and explore all the permutations of all the options available until they've established which path they feel will have the best outcome. Satisficers prioritise efficiency of time and effort. Their primary aim is to reach a conclusion quickly by adopting an it's-good-enough mentality.

When Herbert laid out this theory, he defined satisficing as evaluating the options based on key requirements. For example,

when picking a house to rent, a satisficer might draw up a list of non-negotiable features, look at the first five properties that fit the bill and choose one of them. A maximiser will go much further. They will look for something that has all the essentials and is the place they perceive to be the best possible option on the market. A maximiser might look at 40 houses before finding their perfect one. Many people, of course, will sit somewhere in the middle of the scale. They will still use these processes but on a less extreme level.

## Different types of decisions

Importantly, the nature of the choice in hand might also drive different approaches. A person can swing from one end of the scale to the other based on the decision at hand. Picking a lunch venue is likely to involve different internal processes to deciding on a career path, for example. 'It's about behaviour, not personality,' says Juliet Landau-Pope, a coach specialising in productivity and procrastination. 'People will recognise how they behave in certain situations. Most will have a tendency to one but can also demonstrate the other. It's important when making decisions to consider: "What I am doing right now?"'

## Pros and cons

Both approaches have advantages. Maximising can often lead to better decisions in the long run. Detailed research and careful consideration can mean coming to a decision that is personally most appropriate. Satisficing is efficient and saves time. Self-knowledge and being able to make decisions fast is also good for self-esteem. 'Taking action





can help build confidence in what we're doing,' says Penny Haslam, a motivational speaker and confidence coach.

On the flip side, both approaches can have negative consequences. Maximising can be a form of procrastination driven by perfectionism. 'Procrastination is a source and a symptom of maximising. It's a cycle – the more you get caught up in a loop of researching and thinking, the more you put off decisions and get caught up in the options,' says Juliet. 'It can be caused by a fear of making mistakes or getting it wrong, or [worrying] about what people think.'

Satisficing is a different response to almost the same thing. 'It's a need to prove yourself and always be moving forward,' Penny explains. 'It doesn't allow you to reflect.' This might mean that things are rushed and not thought through, which can lead to regrets further down the line.

### Striking a balance

Extreme approaches often come with risks, and finding a balance is key. 'Both positions have their positives, but overdoing one is not ideal,' says Penny. 'It can impact time, availability, headspace and nervousness about approaching things.' When faced with a range of options, taking a step back to consider where you are on the maximiser-versus-satisficer scale is one way of consciously deciding how to approach a choice. Juliet suggests asking this question: 'What is it that's serving me right now?' This is because 'some situations are

worth investing time in the research, while others aren't,' she says. 'It's all about what's important to you.'

There are also broader benefits to understanding what drives decision making. Recognising other people's thought processes and how they affect their behaviour is central to forming healthy personal and professional relationships. 'Try to understand their agenda. Think about why they might be pushing forward or holding back on something. Consider what is the motivator under their actions and how you can support them,' says Penny. When there is clear communication, understanding and respect for each other's thinking, maximisers and satisficers can work together well. Their decision-making methods can complement each other – one looks at the detail as the other drives things forward.

We need different types of decision-makers in this world. Both maximising and satisficing serve a certain purpose. Frameworks like this aren't the be-all and end-all, but they invite interesting questions and initiate curiosity about our own and other people's ways of operating – both of which are crucial for wellbeing.

Words: Elizabeth Bennett

To find out more about Juliet's coaching practice, visit [jlpcoach.com](http://jlpcoach.com). For more information about Penny's motivational work, go to [pennyhaslam.co.uk](http://pennyhaslam.co.uk).

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## HOW TO SLIDE ALONG THE SCALE

*Juliet's tips for those with maximising tendencies*

**Set a deadline.** If you know you're likely to procrastinate, establish a realistic time frame in which to make your decision. If you're someone who deliberates a lot, set yourself a deadline. You could also appoint an accountability partner, in case you bust your schedule.

**Find a role model.** Choose someone you admire and ponder what they would do. This helps to connect with your greater purpose and can help to make decisions faster.

**Delegate responsibility.** Maximisers are often happier when they're in control, but giving someone else the reins can be liberating. It can also be freeing to see that, sometimes, good-enough decisions can work out perfectly.

*Penny's tips for those with satisficing tendencies*

**Slow down.** This handy ABC trick can help to build in breathing space:

**Acknowledge** what's going on.

**Breathe.**

**Calmly take** considered action.

**Copy a maximiser.** If you're looking to make a decision that's similar to one a maximiser has already had to make, consider letting them do the hard work for you. If your requirements are the same, copy their decision.

**Be patient.** Leaning into uncertainty is key. Sit with the uncomfortable feeling of not having everything sorted and under control (see *Breathe* 46). Once you've learned that you can survive in this state, the pressure to make hasty decisions is lifted.

