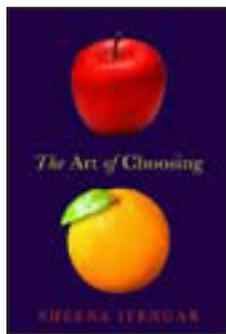




The Art of Choosing

By Sheena Iyengar, 2010, Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, 352 pages, \$25.99, ISBN: 978-0446504102



“What is freedom? Freedom is the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternatives of choice. Without the possibility of choice a man is not a man but a member, an

instrument, a thing.”

This quote by Archibald MacLeish, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, begins *The Art of Choosing*, the new book by Sheena Iyengar, a professor at the Columbia Business School.

“We make choices and are in turn made by them. In other words, choosing helps us create our lives,” Iyengar writes. “The ability to choose well seems to depend in no small part upon our knowing our own minds.”

Iyengar has undergraduate degrees in economics and psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate in social psychology from Stanford University. She is widely considered one of the leading authorities on choice theory; other researchers cite her work extensively. But even though Iyengar is a seasoned academic, *The Art of Choosing* is readily

accessible to anyone who has minimal exposure to the areas her book covers.

The author sees the drive to choose as being fundamental to human nature. This rings true to experience and helps to explain how different political systems have developed and evolved over time. It certainly contributes to our understanding of why democratic forms of government tend to be ultimately more successful than those more totalitarian in nature. “When given the freedom to choose for themselves, the social structures that people from other parts of the world create closely resemble the Western model,” Iyengar observes. “When people aren’t motivated to challenge threats to freedom, what’s to stop them from acquiescing to totalitarianism?”

It is almost a truism that people like to feel that they are in control of their destiny. The idea that we are personally in charge of the direction of our lives is more important than the reality that lies behind our actual circumstance. Without choice — or at least the perception that one has the ability to choose among various alternatives — it is very difficult to sustain motivation.

When individuals come to the conclusion that they do not have control over their personal affairs, they tend to experience heightened anxiety and stress, which can have a negative impact on overall health and well-being.

In Chapter 1, “The Call of the Wild,” Iyengar describes the results of a long-term research project known as the Whitewall

Studies, conducted by Michael Marmot of University College London. Marmot’s team followed a group of 10,000 civil servants in Great Britain beginning in 1967. They tracked these individuals for decades, comparing levels of compensation to general health. “What affected people’s health most in these studies wasn’t the actual level of control that people had in their jobs, but the amount of control they perceived themselves as having,” Iyengar reports. “A well-compensated executive who feels helpless will suffer the same type of negative physiological response as a low-paid mailroom clerk.”

“The less control people had over their work, the higher their blood pressure during work hours,” Iyengar continues. “People with little control over their work also experienced more back pain, missed more days of work due to illness in general and had higher rates of mental illness.”

In Chapter 6, “Lord of the Things,” the author discusses the other end of the spectrum: choice overload. “When the options are few, we can be happy with what we choose since we are confident that it is the best possible choice for us,” Iyengar writes. “When the options are practically infinite, though, we believe that the perfect choice for us must be out there somewhere and that it’s our responsibility to find it.”

“It’s clear that after a certain point, the amount of time and energy directed toward choosing counteracts the benefits of the choice,” she adds. “A focus on simply

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increasing the available choices can lead to decisions that harm rather than help. It was well known even in ancient Greece that we act against our better judgment with disturbing regularity.”

Human beings tend to associate having more options as intrinsically leading to a more beneficial outcome — even when the evidence suggests otherwise. “One of the areas in which we greatly desire choice is health care, and we dislike having restrictions imposed,” Iyengar observes. “Health Maintenance Organizations do, indeed, offer fewer choices, but does that necessarily lead to inferior health care?”

The truth seems to be that most of us would rather decide what we want on our hamburger than to be given a steak without also being provided the same input regarding how it is prepared.

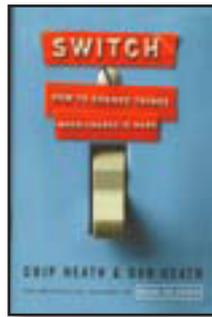
Toward the end of the book, Iyengar offers a number of strategies designed to improve the quality of our decision-making processes. “Science can assist us in becoming more skillful choosers, but at its core, choice remains an art.” So if you are someone who has a difficult time deciding what to do, you might find *The Art of Choosing* to be a particularly enlightening resource. You just have to make the choice to buy it.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, professor of counseling and student affairs, Western Kentucky University.

Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard

By Chip Heath & Dan Heath, 2010, Crown Publishing, 320 pages, \$26, ISBN: 978-0385528757

Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard is a compelling narrative that provides important insight on how to make effective changes in life. Counselors



vague and based upon possibly faulty assumptions perpetuated by poorly researched theories. *Switch*, however, clarifies and explains the science of change in everyday, accessible language. Its content draws upon areas of mental health, sociology and management and includes case studies to illustrate conditions likely to support transformative change.

How does one bring about genuine and lasting change? According to Chip Heath, professor of organizational behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University, and Dan Heath, a former researcher at Harvard Business School and now a senior fellow at Duke University’s CASE Center, the rational side of an individual (likened by these authors to a rider on an elephant) needs to be directed. This rider can be helped by learning to look at past successes, script important moves and point to a desired destination. Motivating the emotional brain, represented by the elephant, is accomplished by finding an optimal feeling, shrinking change to improve self-efficacy and aligning desired outcomes. Together, the rider and the elephant need to determine an optimal path that often requires changing one’s environment, building successful habits and accumulating successes.

This book can facilitate change at every level — individual, organizational and

realize that making meaningful, measurable and sustainable changes is a challenging yet essential process for clients. Understanding of the science of change has been

societal. However, a person will need to appeal to both the rider (which provides planning and direction) and the elephant (which supplies the energy). In other words, the brain is not of one mind. For example, part of it may want to lose weight, but the other part would like a warm chocolate chip cookie. The elephant’s hunger for instant gratification may trump the rider’s strength to think long term unless a person has a plan that satisfies both urges. This will require directing the rider while motivating the elephant.

Switch provides a myriad of inspiring and successful examples of changes made by ordinary people. These changes offer readers not only guidance but hope. This book can be extremely beneficial to counselors in a variety of contexts, because all counselors work to help people achieve desired change.

Reviewed by Mark J. Britzman, professor of counseling and human development, South Dakota State University, and Kylee Britzman, psychology major, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. ♦

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