

# COACH *Notes*



Volume II, No. 6

Newsletter

## Freedom, or Burden of Choice?

### Part 2

*“Here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. As a society, we have achieved what our ancestors could, at most, only dream about, but it has come at a great price. We get what we say we want, only to discover that what we want doesn’t satisfy us...”* – Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*, 2004

We have more material possessions and time-saving devices, but we still don’t have enough time. The middle classes of many countries, not just America, have a degree of autonomy and personal control unimaginable to people living in other times and places. Millions of people live their lives unconstrained by material, economic, or cultural limitations.

In America, the gross domestic product, a primary measure of prosperity, more than doubled in the last 30 years. But the proportion of the population describing itself as “very happy” declined 5 percent. That doesn’t sound like much, but 5 percent represents 14 million people who reported that in the 70s they were very happy but who say that today they are not.

As society grows wealthier and people are free to pursue and do whatever they want, people are getting less happy. The most dramatic measure of this is in the prevalence of clinical depression. By some estimates, depression in the year 2000 was 10 times as prevalent as in the year 1900.

### Modern Times & Rising Suicide Rates

Unlimited choice can produce genuine suffering. Suicide is the second leading cause of death after accidents among American high school and college students. In the past 35 years, the suicide rate among American college students has tripled. Throughout the world, this has been on the rise. In a study comparing rates in 1990 to rates in the 70s

## UNLIMITED POTENTIAL



**HERDLINGER  
ASSOCIATES**

*“Turning potential into performance”*

*David Herdlinger, Herdlinger Associates*

### Dreamers Welcome

**A**t Herdlinger Associates, I encourage people to dream. And the positive results have been astounding!

*When individuals pursue their dreams, their lives percolate with purpose, passion, success, and fulfillment.*

*As a coach, I don’t try to make my clients’ dreams come true. That’s their privilege...and responsibility.*

*My role – and my joy – is to stand by their side to encourage, guide, challenge, and cheer them on.*

*Are your dreams big enough? Let me help you unleash your potential and accomplish more than you ever dreamed possible.*

*...David Herdlinger*

HERDLINGER ASSOCIATES has helped thousands of professionals at all levels in all types of organizations achieve extraordinary success and satisfaction.

We serve clients in North America, Europe, and Asia, ranging in size from individuals and very small businesses to corporations with annual sales in excess of \$40 billion.

Learn more about HerdlingerAssociates at our website:  
[www.TheCoach.biz](http://www.TheCoach.biz)

P.O. Box 20389  
St. Simons Island, GA 31522  
912.634.9300  
877.626.2960 (toll-free)  
[David@TheCoach.biz](mailto:David@TheCoach.biz)

and 80s, UNICEF found that the incidence of suicide tripled in France, more than doubled in Norway, doubled in Australia, and increased by 50 percent or more in Canada, England, and the United States.

In a study of 20 developed Western nations and Japan, those nations whose citizens value personal freedom and control the most tend to have the highest suicide rates.

Young people are faced with lifestyle decisions early in their lives without enough skills or maturity to be able to navigate the decision-making processes successfully. They are less constrained by traditions and family customs than our parents or grandparents; they have more freedom...and more choices to make.

As a person continues into life there are even more decisions that must be made, and with them, an overabundance of choices. Nowhere is this more evident than with child-rearing decisions. The problem is compounded when parents strive to obtain only the best for their kids and find it exhausting. Shopping for the right car seat or stroller becomes a major consumer research project.

## What to Do About Choice Overload?

Barry Schwartz, in his book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004), offers good advice for getting a handle on the problems of too many choices, but they are not easy steps. They require practice, discipline, and a change in the way we think about the value of choice. One of the best ways to explore the problems of choice and solutions is to work with a coach who can help you look at your assumptions and beliefs about freedom and what really matters most.

If you are strongly attached to a belief that *more is better and nothing but the best* is for you, then you may not be ready to change. Schwartz suggests taking an attitude of “good enough.” What parent wants just “good enough” for their children? Yet, if we continue on a path of “only the best,” we are condemned to the treadmill of over-achievement and consumerism. Do we want that for our children? Alternatively, do we want to teach them to focus on what really matters instead of what will look best or outshine the others?

## Choose What to Choose

We can choose our attitude toward choice. It requires soul searching and a firm focus on values and what matters most. Decide which choices

really matter and focus time and energy there. This means letting some opportunities pass by, and that is not always easy to do. Establish rules of thumb such as how much time to allow for making a decision and how many options to choose from, such as only visiting two stores for a certain length of time.

The more we can rely on habits and rules for making some decisions, the more automatic choices become. We don't have to decide when to brush our teeth; most of us do it automatically. Grocery shopping should become more habitual, buying the same products without wasting time to investigate newer choices

There will always be “new and improved,” but most of the time these new product innovations are not going to affect the quality of our lives to any degree. Stick with what works and what is “good enough.”

## What Really Matters?

Focus on what really matters. Choosing a university for your child is an important decision and one that involves the whole family. But the amount of time you spend on this task will not necessarily bring good results; there are too many other variables that will affect your child's happiness and satisfaction in college. The setting becomes a minor decision when looking at the bigger picture.

## An Attitude of Gratitude

Make a decision and then let it go. The grass is always greener, but changing pastures will only compound the problem. Learn to be happy wherever you are, with what you've got. Practice an attitude of gratitude. Remind yourself of the ways in which your decisions are good instead of looking for what is wrong.

Remember that no matter what choice you make, after a while, you will adapt. Your new toy, or car, or house, will become comfortable and you will take it for granted. This is the process of adaptation. It is also when we start looking for why the initial joy has gone, doubting our decision, and looking for greener pastures. Remember that comfort is a good thing.

Stop looking around and comparing. Other people's toys and acquisitions are not better than yours are, they only look that way.

As Barry Schwartz concludes in his book,

*Remember that “He who dies with the most toys wins” is a bumper sticker, not wisdom.*