

The Hidden Risks of Opting for the Familiar

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When people are under pressure, they often try to surround themselves with things that are familiar. A study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that this is true even when the familiar choice is the worst choice and amplifies the pressure.

The research was inspired by an iPhone app that displays nearby taxis on a map and also lets you rate them. Ab Litt, a graduate student in marketing at Stanford University, wondered if people who saw a cab they'd rated highly before would choose that cab even if another one was closer—and whether that choice would change if they were in a hurry. So along with Taly Reich, Senia Maymin, and Baba Shiv, he designed experiments to look at the choices people make when they are under pressure.

In one experiment, people played a game called Math Tower, but the game was not supposed to be fun. To play the game, people had to start with a number, then do a list of mathematical operations in a row—divide by seven, multiply by six, add 15—and the computer would tell them when they messed up. “The game was awful. It was boring, it was unpleasant, and it was hard,” Litt says. You'd think people who had played it would want to avoid it.

However, people were then given a choice between what games to play next. They could either play Puzzle Castle, which had a logo similar to Math Tower's, or Word Forest, which had a different logo. They were also told they couldn't make as many points on Puzzle Castle.

People who were under pressure—those who were told they had to make a certain number of points in order to have a chance at winning a \$50 gift card—were more likely to pick the game with a logo that resembled the logo of Math Tower, even though they'd just had a miserable time playing that game. “When there was the familiar logo, people's decisions were distorted toward choosing an option that was actually worse,” Litt says. People who saw a different set of options, where neither logo looked like the dreaded Math Tower, chose better and were more likely to pick the game that could give them more points.

So how do you avoid falling into a trap where you choose familiarity over the best option? Litt suggests thinking beyond your gut feeling may be the solution. “If you ask people to think about which options are actually better, this could cause them to focus more on the objective evidence they have rather than the comfort they feel.”