Too Many Choices, Not Enough Decisions : Preventing Anxiety in Our Children

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Anxiety seems to be much more prevalent in modern times than it was in previous generations. Some argue that one of the factors causing this is the number of choices we have on a daily basis. Living in a *shtetl* with few people, few stores, and few outlets can feel comfortable. It means our lives are simpler and require less decision making. There is less to worry about. In addition, we basically knew ahead of time how our lives would play out, at least regarding those aspects over which we had control. We knew where we would live, what occupation we would follow, how we would eat, where we would go to shul, and where our children would go to school. Today, our choices about all these aspects of life are much broader. Unfortunately, when a person is inundated with options and, thus, decisions, it can trigger anxiety. This can be true even regarding small decisions.

I recall growing up as a small child in Rabbi Beryl Wein's shul in Monsey, and a line of his would occasionally catch my attention. He once remarked that, if you give a child one lollipop, he's happy. Two lollipops and he's thrilled. But offer him a third lollipop and, with both hands already occupied with lollipops, he begins to cry. He is now confronted with the need to choose. Choices generally mean choosing one option over another, which entails an "opportunity cost." The child may want that third lollipop, but he may then have to give up one of the lollipops he is currently holding. (Or he can quickly place one in his mouth and make room for the third.) Studies have shown that when supermarkets stock the shelves with too many choices of a particular condiment, it subconsciously discourages the shopper from buying that condiment at all in order to obviate the need to choose. Such people live their lives attempting to avoid all discomfort, despite the fact that they will therefore have less abundance in their lives (whether of the condiment, a prospective *shidduch*, home, job opportunity, or learning *seder*, etc.).

It gets worse. Dr. David Pelcovitz often quotes studies done by psychologists showing the effect of "learned helplessness." If animals (some studies involved humans) were put in a situation of pain and discomfort and given an option to help themselves, they learned that method, and then learned to consistently look for ways to help themselves in other circumstances as well. They began to see the world as a place where viable options exist and that one should always attempt to solve a problem currently affecting them. However, if the animals were given no options to help themselves, they learned the opposite and wouldn't bother looking for solutions despite being placed in new environments where solutions existed.

Applying this concept to the problem of anxiety, it becomes clear that, if we make all of our children's decisions for them, we are helping them learn helplessness. How can we help our children develop the mental muscle necessary to withstand the discomfort of opportunity cost and, rather, think in helpful, problem-solving ways, as opposed to helpless ways? One simple approach would be to allow children to make decisions and to deal with the natural consequences of those decisions.

Chaim comes home from school one day distraught. His parents ask him what happened, and he says, "Nothing." Many parents, out of love for the child, will continue to follow the child and ask him what happened, continuing to encourage him to open up. However, Chaim has just made a choice: not to speak about what happened at that moment. If we effectively take that choice away, he begins to learn that he does not make decisions. His parents make decisions for him. Eventually, if a choice comes his way, anxiety may ensue.

However, if his parents tell him they respect his decision not to discuss what happened right now and give him some time to rest, eat, or exercise, he begins to feel like he can make decisions, within his parents' guidelines. (Additionally, the child will be much more likely to open up a few hours later or the next day, after having felt that ability and having calmed down.) While a baby requires his parents making all decisions for him, a preschool child can already be given small opportunities to make decisions. For example, a parent can give a child a choice of healthy snacks they can have when they come home from school: either an apple or blueberries. A child can be given a choice to have a 30-minute rest and relaxation time with a board game or a book but not both. Thus, the parent has set a healthy framework within which the child can make a decision and learn to handle not having both.

Yitzi (12) and Yoni (23), brothers, are both approaching beautiful milestones in their lives. Their parents are very busy planning all the arrangements for Yitzi's upcoming bar mitzva and Yoni's upcoming wedding. As parents, they should be the ones making all the major decisions, which involve community sensitivities and financial considerations. The bar mitzva boy and *chassan* are more like the *cheftza shel mitzva*, the reason for the simcha but not the *ba'al habayis*, the one in charge of making the simcha. However, if they are not allowed to make any decisions whatsoever, they will lack exposure to opportunity cost and begin to learn helplessness. I often advise parents of a bar mitzva child to encourage their son to invite a few boys he normally would not invite since he is not close with them. This is a perfect opportunity for him to make a decision: Who should those few invitees be? The *chassan* can be given a quota of guests he can invite (a major parental decision). He can then choose whom to invite and have to deal with the opportunity cost of not inviting others.

It is interesting to note that combating decision-anxiety through exposing children to the fears and pains of decision making is actually rooted in the same concept as an evidenced-based approach for all clinical anxieties (not the subject of this article). Exposure and

response prevention (ERP) therapy essentially seeks to help a client "lower the volume" of their anxious thoughts through habituating him or her to the anxiety-provoking stimulus. It is the repeated exposure to the anxiety that helps treat that anxiety (in a fine-tuned professional structure). The successful results I have seen professionally, using such an approach, are astounding. Of course, the nuances involved require that such an approach only be implemented by a professional who is well trained and experienced in this modality. This article is based on a similar idea, utilizing exposure, but in more of a preventative way, for parents to use in non-clinical cases. If a child doesn't respond to basic parental interventions, and the anxiety begins to express itself in irrational ways, a consultation with a professional is in order.

Ten years later, Yitzi, now in *shidduchim*, meets a wonderful girl, and understands that he can make decisions. He is also comfortable deciding to marry this girl despite then not being able to marry all the other "fish in the sea." (After all, what good are all the fish if you don't catch any of them?) He has learned helpfulness and has developed the mental fortitude to handle making a decision and its resultant opportunity cost.

His older brother Yoni, now a parent, realizes his parents gave him guided space to make decisions and sometimes make mistakes. He and his wife now implement such a strategy with their children, recognizing that parenting is not about controlling your children; it is all about training children to become healthy, independent adults.

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