When feeling pressured, people often most desire what is familiar. Familiarity signals safety, which gains heightened importance and appeal in stressful and high-pressure situations. Heightened favoring of familiarity under conditions of stress has been extensively documented in animal research showing neophobia as an outcome of physiological stressors (Griebel, Belzung, Misslin, & Vogel, 1993; Heinrichs & Koob, 1992; Shephard & Estall, 1984; Shors & Wood, 1995). In humans, familiarity’s “warm glow” (Titchener, 1915) has been most compellingly documented in mere-exposure paradigms (e.g., Moreland & Zajonc, 1976; Zajonc, 1968). Pressure, stress, and apprehension amplify the attractiveness of stimuli made familiar through prior exposure (Kruglanski, Freund, & Bar-Tal, 1998; Shors & Wood, 1995). Flight to familiar comfort foods (Wansink, Cheney, & Chan, 2003) increases under stress, such as that arising from the pressures of college life (Kandiah, Yake, Jones, & Meyer, 2006). When both infants (Shore, 1994) and adults (Bornstein, 1989) desire safety, their familiarity preference increases. Conversely, by independently signaling safety, positive feelings can eliminate preferences for the familiar (de Vries, Holland, Chenier, Starr, & Winkielman, 2010). Norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) also suggests that unfamiliar choices and actions may feel less safe than familiar alternatives, because of higher anticipated regret should things go awry (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Simonson, 1992).

### Abstract
Under pressure, people often prefer what is familiar, which can seem safer than the unfamiliar. We show that such favoring of familiarity can lead to choices precisely contrary to the source of felt pressure, thus exacerbating, rather than mitigating, its negative consequences. In Experiment 1, time pressure increased participants’ frequency of choosing to complete a longer but incidentally familiar task option (as opposed to a shorter but unfamiliar alternative), resulting in increased felt stress during task completion. In Experiment 2, pressure to reach a performance benchmark in a chosen puzzle increased participants’ frequency of choosing an incidentally familiar puzzle that both augured and delivered objectively worse performance (i.e., fewer points obtained). Participants favored this familiar puzzle even though familiarity was established through unpleasant prior experience. This “devil you know” preference under pressure contrasted with disfavoring of the negatively familiar option in a pressure-free situation. These results demonstrate that pressure-induced flights to familiarity can sometimes aggravate rather than ameliorate pressure, and can occur even when available evidence points to the suboptimality of familiar options.

### Keywords
decision making, familiarity, judgment and heuristics, pressure, stress

### Backfiring Flights to Familiarity
But whatever it may signal, familiarity is not synonymous with safety. Familiar stimuli need not be those most likely to ameliorate felt pressure and stress. Indeed, sometimes a familiar choice can precisely exacerbate the source of one’s felt pressure. As an illustrative example, imagine that you drive the same route to work every day, along a frequently congested highway. You are aware of a potentially quicker route involving various side streets, but have taken it only a few times. On a day when you are running late for an important meeting, the increased pressure to arrive on time might magnify the attractiveness of taking the familiar (but longer) route. But this familiar choice will only increase your likelihood of being late, which is the very source of the pressure you felt originally. Similarly, pressure to make lifestyle changes to improve one’s health or appearance may serve to actually increase the appeal of the very same familiar behaviors that one is trying to resist (e.g., poor dietary choices, smoking). In sum, familiar stimuli and behaviors may feel safer and be more attractive than unfamiliar alternatives when one is under pressure and...
feeling stress, but as these cases make clear, giving in to familiar behaviors may in fact sometimes aggravate rather than mitigate the felt pressure and stress that induced such familiarity favoring.

Note that the kind of situation we are describing differs in an important way from simply costly or maladaptive familiarity preferences. Preferring familiar but unhealthy comfort foods, for instance, can have negative side effects for health regardless of why they are preferred (Wansink et al., 2003), and such preferences also lead to avoiding unfamiliar but nutritionally valuable foods (Lauchbaugh, Provenza, & Werkmeister, 1997; Pliner & Melo, 1997). The research we report here explored cases akin to favoring unhealthy comfort foods because of felt stress regarding obesity or because of other potential direct consequences of favoring precisely such foods; that is, we studied familiarity favoring that is exactly contrary to the stressor causing it. Such situations may give rise to vicious cycles in which choices induced by stress actually exacerbate that original stress, further enhancing preferences for familiar but counterproductive choices. Thus, going beyond prior work on stress and familiarity preferences, this research makes a novel contribution in exploring situations in which a stressor is directly counterposed to the negative consequences of favoring a familiar option, and testing whether familiarity-favoring behaviors may persist and thus actually exacerbate the stressor fueling that familiarity preference and its negative consequences.

Of course, we are not saying that such familiar options are guaranteed to yield worse outcomes: In the case of our earlier example, an unfamiliar driving route might take you longer if you get lost or are unaware of ongoing construction work on that route. But even when there is no objective evidence for such possibilities, pressure may increase worry about unknown aspects of unfamiliar options, enhance feelings of comfort and safety associated with the familiar, and generally increase inferences (unsupported by explicit evidence) in favor of familiar options that available evidence actually disfavors. Even when all available evidence suggests that a familiar option is suboptimal and will only exacerbate one’s stress, can that very stress distort reasoning and drawing of inferences in favor of that option, resulting in decision making that favors the familiar option over a seemingly superior, albeit unfamiliar, option?

We examined this question through two experiments that tested for such pressure-induced perverse flights to familiarity. Together, these experiments illustrate how felt pressure can increase preferences for familiar options that aggravate subjective and objective dimensions of such pressure.

**Experiment 1**

**Method**

One hundred forty-five participants (90 female, 54 male, 1 whose gender was unreported) from a national online pool participated in Experiment 1 in exchange for entry in a drawing for a $50 gift card. They were randomly assigned to the four cells of a 2 (pressure: no pressure vs. time pressure) × 2 (option set: both options unfamiliar vs. longer option familiar) design. In Part 1 of the experimental session, participants were shown a photo of and biographical information about an individual (date of birth, hobbies, college major, taste in books and music, etc.). They were asked to consider this information and judge this person’s likely preferences in various domains (e.g., film genres, career choices, gifts likely to be enjoyed). This task was intended to induce feelings of relative familiarity associated with one choice option some participants would encounter later.

In Part 2, participants were told they would complete a word-puzzle task and that correct responses would gain them entry into an additional drawing for a $50 gift card. It was explained that the task (adapted from Litt, Khan, & Shiv, 2010) involved counting letter occurrences in passages of text, subject to multiple inclusion and exclusion rules (e.g., “all occurrences of the letter ‘e’ following other vowels, except if the word begins with a vowel”). In the no-pressure condition, participants were told they could take as long as they wished to complete the task. In the time-pressure condition, they were told they would have at most 4 min for the task. Participants chose between two puzzle-task options: one consisting of three passages of text to work through (the longer task option) and the other consisting of only two passages (the shorter task option). The only other information provided to participants was the name of the individuals who designed the options. In the both-unfamiliar condition, neither of these individuals had yet been encountered in the experimental session. In the longer-option-familiar condition, the designer of the longer (three-passage) option was the same person participants had learned about in Part 1 of the experiment.

Nothing directly implied or suggested that the two options’ passages differed in difficulty, length, complexity, or any other dimension. The information provided implied only that the longer task option required completing an additional passage. Moreover, the biographical information provided in Part 1 offered no plausibly inferable insights that would aid in completing a puzzle task designed by that person (see the Supplemental Material available online for results of confirmatory pretests). Thus, all explicit objective evidence disfavored choosing the longer task option in the time-pressure condition, regardless of whether or not it was associated with the familiar person.

After selecting and completing their respective activities, all participants reported on a scale from 1 to 9 how concerned they felt during the pre-puzzle-task choice phase that they would have enough time to complete their chosen task successfully; they used the same scale to rate their stress during the task and how difficult they perceived the task to be. Participants also reported on possible safety- and comfort-related rationales for the specific choice they made, using the same 9-point scale to indicate how strongly they believed that their chosen option felt like a safer decision, offered a better chance of succeeding, was a less risky choice, and fit with their “gut
feeling” of which was the best choice. We tested these as possible bases for choosing the familiar task option despite the explicit evidence disfavoring it.

**Results and discussion**

We observed a pressure-induced perverse familiarity bias: Time pressure increased the percentage of participants who chose the task option associated with a familiar person, even though available information indicated that it would likely require more time to complete (Fig. 1a). Breaking down the overall between-conditions difference in task-option choice, $\chi^2(3, N = 145) = 12.25, p < .01$, we found that more participants chose the longer option in the time-pressure/longer-option-familiar condition than in both the no-pressure conditions ($p_s < .05$, Fisher’s exact test). In addition,
familiarity significantly reversed a bias against the longer option in the time-pressure/both-unfamiliar condition (p < .01, Fisher’s exact test). Thus, time pressure increased choice of a familiar option, despite evidence that this option might actually exacerbate such pressure.

Analyses of the remaining measures provided additional insight into this effect. The effectiveness of the pressure manipulation was verified by the fact that time-pressure concern during the pre-puzzle-task choice phase was higher in the time-pressure condition (M = 5.93, SD = 2.79) than in the no-pressure condition (M = 2.82, SD = 2.42), F(1, 133) = 39.69, p < .001. Critically, time-pressure concern exhibited an interactive effect of pressure, option set, and puzzle-task choice, F(1, 133) = 7.27, p < .01. As Figure 1b shows, in the time-pressure/longer-option-familiar condition, time concern was greater among participants who chose the longer task (M = 6.67) than among those who chose the shorter one (M = 4.56), t(34) = −2.12, p < .05, whereas in all other conditions, participants who chose the shorter task were more concerned about time than were those who chose the longer task, as would be expected given the explicitly provided task information (mean difference > 1.93 in all conditions, ts(34) > 2.79, ps < .01). Thus, when a familiar option was available, time pressure seemed to magnify its attractiveness, although otherwise time pressure attenuated this option’s attractiveness.

In contrast, as Table 1 shows, perceived stress and task difficulty during task completion were greater among participants under time pressure, Fs(1, 134) > 17.51, ps < .001, and those who chose the longer option, Fs(1, 134) > 8.46, ps < .01; the interactive effects of time pressure and choice of the longer option on perceived stress and task difficulty were also significant, Fs(1, 134) > 7.82, ps < .01. In contrast, perceived stress and task difficulty did not differ across the familiarity factor, Fs(1, 134) < 2.54, ps > .13 (tests of the main effect of familiarity and the interaction of familiarity with time pressure and option choice). Thus, even though participants chose the familiar option more often when they were under impending time pressure, they still found the longer task to be more stressful and difficult. The pressure-induced familiarity favoring thus had effects precisely contrary to mitigation of that pressure, as measured by these subjective ratings.

Results also indicated that choice of the longer, familiar option was associated with safety- and comfort-related rationalizations for choosing that option. Among participants in the longer-option-familiar conditions, those who chose the longer option stated that it felt like a safer decision (r = .33, p < .01), offered a better chance of succeeding (r = .35, p < .01), was a less risky choice (r = .40, p < .01), and fit with their gut feeling of which was the best choice (r = .55, p < .001). Choice of the longer option was not associated with these rationales in the both-unfamiliar conditions (|rps < .18, ps > .14). Thus, participants provided safety- and comfort-related rationales for choosing a familiar option, despite explicitly available evidence suggesting that this option was likely to exacerbate stress.

### Experiment 2

Experiment 2 extended Experiment 1 in four key respects. First, we established felt familiarity with an available choice option through preceding experience with a stimulus that was merely similar to that option in superficial respects, rather than being the same stimulus. Such generalization would fit with established “structural” mere-exposure effects (Gordon & Holyoak, 1983) and broader results showing similarity-based preference spillover (Lewicki, 1986; Litt et al., 2010). Showing preference shifts toward options sharing only superficial similarities to familiar stimuli would rule out any plausible interpretation that favoring of the familiar was based on presumed added knowledge or insight (just as knowing one person’s temperament offers little insight regarding the temperament of someone who merely looks like that person).

Second, and most important, this preceding familiarity induction was a negative, unpleasant experience, rather than a neutral (or perhaps enjoyable) one. Previous research suggests that stimulus familiarity enhances liking only if the familiarity-inducing experiences are neutral or positive (Brickman, Redfield, Harrison, & Crandall, 1972). Also, in a classic study, Lewicki (1986) showed that a negative encounter with a confederate biased participants against other, entirely different people who simply physically resembled the confederate. But if such negatively tinged familiarity does not connote liking,

### Table 1. Mean Ratings of Feelings During Task Completion in Experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>No-pressure condition</th>
<th>Time-pressure condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both options</td>
<td>Long option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unfamiliar</td>
<td>familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shorter option chosen</td>
<td>Longer option chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt stress</td>
<td>2.82 (2.16)</td>
<td>4.37 (2.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task difficulty</td>
<td>5.21 (2.25)</td>
<td>5.18 (2.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.
does it still signal safety? We tested whether pressure would shift preferences toward such a “devil you know” over a relatively unfamiliar option, even if the familiar option was disfavored in the absence of pressure.

Third, generalizing beyond time pressure, Experiment 2 instead induced pressure via a performance benchmark that participants were challenged to meet. We examined choices when evidence suggested that a familiar option offered a more difficult route to achieving this benchmark. Thus, familiarity was directly counterposed to the performance pressure that might enhance its attractiveness.

Finally, we tested for objective performance differences between conditions, rather than examining subjective measures of felt stress or difficulty. We predicted that performance would be degraded when performance pressure was instilled in the presence of a familiar but performance-undermining choice option.

Method

One hundred ninety-four participants (125 female, 65 male, 4 whose gender was unreported) from a national online pool participated in Experiment 2 in exchange for entry in a drawing for a $50 gift card. They were randomly assigned to the cells in a 2 (pressure: no pressure vs. performance pressure) × 2 (option set: both options unfamiliar vs. fewer-points option familiar) design. Participants were told they would be testing two educational-software puzzle activities under development by small start-up companies. The first puzzle, Math Tower, was designed to be frustrating and unpleasant. It involved a long series of chained arithmetic problems (answers to earlier questions being operands of subsequent questions), including computations for which errors could be expected (e.g., counting letter occurrences in dense text passages). Participants were told that any such errors “give your tower a ‘shaky foundation,’ risking collapse,” and would require them to restart (with new questions). All participants endured two such frustrating restarts, and thus completed three sets of chained arithmetic problems of seven to eight questions each. Afterward, participants rated this puzzle as highly frustrating (M = 6.96 on a 9-point scale) and unpleasant (M = 2.57, reverse-coded on a 9-point scale).

Each question screen of the Math Tower puzzle featured its logo and manufacturer information in a consistent font (Fig. 2). The familiarization with these stimuli in a negative

First Puzzle

Second Puzzle Choice

![Logo stimuli](image)

Fig. 2. Logo stimuli used to identify the puzzles in Experiment 2. All participants first worked on the Math Tower puzzle. Subsequently, they chose which of two puzzles they wanted to work on; one of these puzzles afforded an opportunity to earn more points than the other. In the both-unfamiliar condition, participants chose between puzzles with logo and manufacturer formatting very different from that of Math Tower; in the fewer-points-option-familiar condition, their choice was between a puzzle that had familiar formatting but offered fewer possible points and a puzzle that had unfamiliar formatting but offered more possible points.
context (completing the associated unpleasant puzzle with multiple restarts) was what we used to establish familiarity with an option for the second puzzle. For this second puzzle, participants were told they would complete word problems, each of which was worth a certain number of points if answered correctly. They chose between two different products to test: one that was potentially worth up to 120 points (fewer-points option) and one that was potentially worth up to 160 points (more-points option). In the both-unfamiliar condition, both options featured logo information and formatting very different from that of the earlier Math Tower puzzle. In the fewer-points-option-familiar condition, the fewer-points option was called Puzzle Castle, and the formatting of its logo and manufacturer information bore a superficial resemblance to that of the Math Tower puzzle (Fig. 2).

In the no-pressure condition, participants were told they would be entered into an additional drawing for a $50 gift card simply for working on their chosen puzzle. In the performance-pressure condition, they were told they had to score at least 80 points to be entered into this drawing. The instructions explicitly spelled out that this meant they had to win one half of the available points for the more-points option or two thirds of the available points for the fewer-points option. As in Experiment 1, nothing implied or suggested that the two puzzles’ questions differed in difficulty, complexity, or any other respect (see the Supplemental Materials for results of pretests). The information provided implied only that in the performance-pressure condition, the fewer-points option required obtaining the same number of points from fewer points available. Thus, explicitly available evidence disfavored choosing the fewer-points option under performance pressure.

The puzzles participants completed were SAT-style word analogies, each worth 20 points; the more-points version consisted of eight multiple-choice questions, and the fewer-points version consisted of a random subset of six of these same eight questions. We scored participants’ responses, and the actual number of points earned served as an objective measure of task performance. Finally, all participants reported how concerned they felt about performing well during the choice phase; this question was analogous to the measure of pretask time-pressure concern in Experiment 1.

**Results and discussion**

We again observed a perverse flight to familiarity: Performance pressure increased choice of a superficially familiar puzzle for which evidence suggested adequate performance would be more difficult (Fig. 3a). Breaking down the overall between-conditions difference in puzzle choice, χ²(3, N = 194) = 10.65, p < .05, we found strong biases against the fewer-points option in the no-pressure/fewer-points-option-familiar and performance-pressure/both-unfamiliar conditions (ps < .001, binomial tests against chance responding). The latter result is what would be expected given what the explicitly provided information indicated: Choosing the puzzle offering more points would provide the best chance of meeting the performance benchmark in the performance-pressure condition. The former finding, in a condition in which points had no real incentive value because there was no performance pressure, replicated the antifamiliarity bias Lewicki (1986) observed when familiarity was established via negative experience with superficially similar stimuli (here, the unpleasant earlier puzzle). Both of these biases were reversed in our main condition of interest, in which performance pressure was combined with familiarity with the fewer-points option (ps < .05, Fisher’s exact test). Thus, performance pressure combined with familiarity increased choice of an option that either factor alone strongly disfavored.

Results for performance-pressure concern during the choice phase were analogous to those for Experiment 1. The effectiveness of our pressure manipulation was verified by the finding
that concern about performance was higher in the performance-pressure condition (M = 5.48, SD = 2.40) than in the no-pressure condition (M = 4.36, SD = 2.33), t(1, 182) = 12.93, p < .001. Again, we found an interaction of pressure, option set, and puzzle choice, t(1, 182) = 6.51, p < .05. In the performance-pressure/fewer-points-option-familiar condition, choosing the fewer-points puzzle was associated with greater performance concern (M = 6.40) than was choosing the more-points puzzle (M = 4.64), t(46) = -2.88, p < .01, whereas in all other conditions, participants who chose the more-points puzzle were more concerned with performance than were those who chose the fewer-points puzzle, as would be expected given the explicitly provided task information (mean difference > 1.90 in all conditions), t(s)(46) > 2.05, ps < .05. Thus, when an option was familiar and participants were under performance pressure, concern about performance magnified the option’s attractiveness, whereas in the absence of either pressure or familiarity, concern about performance attenuated the attractiveness of that option.

This flight to familiarity induced by performance pressure worsened objectively measured performance. As would be expected, choosing the fewer-points puzzle was strongly associated with obtaining fewer points, F(1, 182) = 42.06, p < .001. As Figure 3b shows, under performance pressure, participants who chose from the fewer-points-familiar option set scored fewer points (M = 89.17, SD = 39.56) than those who chose from the both-unfamiliar set (M = 107.92, SD = 39.33), t(94) = 2.54, p = .01. The flight to familiarity induced by performance pressure thus produced objective results that were precisely contrary to the motivation that led to familiarity favoring.

General Discussion

We have demonstrated that familiarity preferences amplified by felt pressure may be more than simply detrimental and may in fact precisely backfire, leading to decisions contrary to the relief and amelioration of such pressure. More than showing just a maladaptive familiarity preference, our results illustrate how stress-induced familiarity favoring can perversely exacerbate the very stressor that is its source. Experiment 1 showed that time pressure increased (rather than decreased) the frequency with which participants chose to complete a longer task that was incidentally associated with a familiar person, a choice exacerbating felt time stress in completing the task. Individuals who made this familiar choice reported safety- and comfort-related rationales for believing it was the better choice, despite having received explicit evidence to the contrary. Experiment 2 showed analogous effects of performance pressure on objectively measured performance degradation, even though familiarity with an available choice option was established through unpleasant prior experience with a different, only superficially similar stimulus. Such familiarity favoring overcame a tendency, when all options were unfamiliar, to choose a different option that available evidence suggested would better ensure adequate performance. It also overcame the typical disfavoring of a stimulus similar to one encountered in an unpleasant prior experience (Lewicki, 1986; Litt et al., 2010); Thus, our research suggests that such disfavoring may be critically moderated by felt stress and pressure.

We propose that such perverses flights to familiarity arise because safety gains add appeal when one is under pressure (Griebel et al., 1993; Shore, 1994). Because familiar options are viewed as safer than unfamiliar options (Bornstein, 1989; de Vries et al., 2010), pressure magnifies their attractiveness, even when they are in fact exactly contrary to the very source of that pressure. Our research illustrates that familiarity can remain attractive as a signal of safety even when it in fact entails precisely the opposite. Mere perceived safety, in turn, need not imply that an option will be best for reducing the felt pressure and stress that is the source of a familiarity bias.

Likely boundaries for the effects we observed warrant future inquiry. For instance, Wood (2010) showed that life upheaval and change—presumably a stressor in many cases—can, by activating change-oriented mind-sets, actually increase variety seeking and reduce familiarity preferences for foods and products. Thus, the means of arousing stress and pressure may be an important factor influencing familiarity preferences. Further, is possible that individuals can and do correct for pressure-induced familiarity preferences that, after further evaluation, they realize may be contrary to mitigating their stress. Research manipulating cognitive load or prompting elaboration could shed light on this possibility. In addition, norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) suggests that anticipated regret may bias people toward more conventional, familiar actions. If so, testing counterfactual thinking in decision making under pressure, or explicitly inducing thinking about forgone actions and options, may provide additional important insight into our effects.

Although our core result is the demonstration of a uniquely perverse form of detrimental familiarity favoring, it is important to recognize that familiarity preferences can sometimes be sensible or adaptive. If familiarity is not simply incidental (as was purposely true in our studies), but instead reflects some valuable knowledge about or experience with a particular behavior, stimulus, or decision option, then stronger familiarity favoring under pressure seems quite reasonable, and may yield better results precisely when they are most desired or needed. And even when familiarity is incidental, if it so happens that the familiar option is indeed a superior choice, pressure-driven familiarity favoring may in fact yield improved outcomes. To illustrate this point, we ran two additional conditions of our Experiment 1 (no pressure and time pressure) in which the shorter (not longer) task option was incidentally familiar. Whereas 60% (21/35) of participants in the no-pressure condition chose this familiar, shorter option, significantly more participants in the time-pressure condition did so (30/36 = 83%; p = .04, Fisher’s exact test). Thus, in this case, pressure-induced familiarity favoring increased choice of the superior option.
Process measures reported in this research suggest that both felt pressure regarding a choice’s outcome and feelings of safety and comfort associated with a familiar option are important to understanding how pressure induces familiarity favoring. Further research should explore and formally establish other process factors and mediators. Negative mood states and heightened feelings of uncertainty when under pressure, combined with the ability of felt familiarity to rectify these feelings (e.g., see de Vries et al., 2010), seem promising as possible additional underpinnings of the effects we observed. Also relevant may be how and when participants draw inferences regarding “true” decision-option superiority, given conversational implicatures often inherent in option presentation (e.g., a two-option choice set in which one option is clearly dominant might imply that the “worse” option has some compensating qualities; Hilton, 1995; Schwarz, 1996). Our pretest results seem contrary to the possibility that participants made at least certain specific inferences that our objectively disfavored options somehow must have had compensating qualities. But in any case, the observed interactive effect of pressure and familiarity on choices suggests at least that the drawing of any such biased inferences is magnified by the confluence of felt pressure and presence of a familiar option. Further exploration of underlying process factors seems an important area for further research.

Across the two experiments, our results showed that individuals made perversely distorted choices when available alternatives were a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, whereas they made superior choices (in both subjective and objective respects) when choice sets were limited to unfamiliar options. Thus, at least in some cases, having information about differences in the relative familiarity of options may be another dimension that leads to “less is better” decision making (i.e., better choices when there are fewer options or less information available; Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Liberman & Ross, 2006; Schwartz, 2005).

Finally, our core novel result—that pressure increases preferences for options that ultimately exacerbate pressure—helps extend the literature on self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors caused by negative or mismanaged emotional states (Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Chapman & Gavrin, 1999; Leith & Baumeister, 1996). Negative-feedback processes between stress and familiarity might also contribute to driving similar vicious cycles in habitual, addictive, and other behaviors (Ahmed & Koob, 2005; Montague, Hyman, & Cohen, 2004; Swinburn & Egger, 2004). Under pressure, people tend to fall back on familiar and well-formed habits (e.g., Zajonc & Sales, 1966)—even, as the current research suggests, if the result is yet more stress, and the exacerbation of the very causes of that stress.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material
Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

Note
1. Because there were no objective benchmarks for success in the no-pressure conditions, beyond simply taking part in the task, the performance results are not clearly interpretable.

References


