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Contact: [Rom Schrift](#) or [Vladimir DoviJarov](#)

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I Feel Your Pain: Does Watching Someone Agonize Over a Decision Make Us Want What They Want?

Making a tough decision can trigger so much stress and anxiety that the physical signs become evident to others. According to a recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), seeing someone experience emotional agony while making a decision can make us agree with their decision—more so than if we hadn't witnessed it.



“As social creatures, we are attuned to other people’s emotional states. Observing a decision maker in agony triggers empathy and a sense of shared identity. Consequently, our own selection tends to align with the ultimate choice of the decider,” write authors Rom Y. Schrift (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania) and Moty Amar (Ono Academic College).

In one study, observers watched actors decide between two charities when making a donation. Some actors appeared very conflicted about the decision while others did not. When asked to make the same decision, the observers were more likely to donate to the charity chosen by actors who appeared more conflicted.

Another study focused on group decision making. Members of a group were asked to vote whether to accept an outsider’s offer. People tended to agree with fellow team-members’ votes (to accept or reject the offer) when they had exhibited more emotional conflict over the decision.

Interestingly, an exception occurred when observers found the decision maker’s inner conflict unwarranted – for example, when making a choice between two unmarked boxes containing either \$200,000 or \$150,000. Because observers considered both options a huge prize, they had less empathy and alignment with the actor.

“These findings could prove valuable in many contexts, such as when building a consensus around a difficult decision—as in a jury—or persuading others to choose a specific product or service. Pain and decisional conflict matter bring us closer,” the authors conclude.

Rom Y. Schrift and Moty Amar. “[Pain and Preferences: Observed Decisional Conflict and the Convergence of Preferences.](#)” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2015.



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