

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Crowding

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Do you feel overwhelmed by the number of people around you? Do you feel uncomfortable in large groups of people?

**Crowding** is the uncomfortable feeling most people get when there are too many people around them. However, crowding is not directly related to **density** – the number of people in a particular area. In a high-density situation, some people feel crowded, while others do not.

Psychological studies show that men typically react more negatively to crowded situations of the same sex than women do. There are several possible reasons for this difference. Since crowding leads to arousal, and men act more aggressively when aroused, this may be a reason. In addition, women tend to view physical closeness with other women as communicating friendship and warmth. In contrast, men are more likely to feel threatened by feelings of homosexual overtones in their closeness. Thirdly, women are more likely to communicate their uncomfortable feelings with other women, creating feelings of empathy. Trying to be "*strong*," men are more likely to keep these feelings to themselves, expressing them through irritation at the closeness with other men. This gender difference in the reaction to crowding may be due to any one (or more) of these factors.

There are several reasons why crowding makes us feel uncomfortable. One reason is related to **stimulus overload** – there are just too many stimuli competing for our attention. We cannot notice or respond to all of them. This feeling is typical of the harried mother, who has several children competing for her attention, while she is on the phone and the doorbell is ringing. This leaves her feeling confused, fatigued and yearning to withdraw from the situation. There are strong feelings of a **lack of privacy** – being unable to pay attention to what you want without being repeatedly interrupted or observed by others.

In otherwise open offices, low partitions between desks can reduce the stimulus overload and give workers some privacy. When we walk on a crowded street, we tend to pay less attention to others around us. We tend to ignore low priority inputs – people or events that have little significance for us. Secretaries do the same thing for their bosses – they filter out or take care of many routine matters, so the boss can concentrate on major ones.

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**Although crowding is related to population density,  
it is not the same thing.**

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**Behavioral constraint** also makes us feel crowded. Others' behavior interferes with what we are doing – we lose some of our ability to *control our interactions* with others. We have lost some personal freedom. When at a football game, we don't mind the thousands of fans cheering for our team. However, at half-time, we probably feel very crowded in long lines to buy refreshments or to use the restroom. After the game, we tend to get upset by being jostled by others while getting out of the stadium and being delayed by others while trying to drive out of the parking lot. Most of us try to *escape* or *avoid* such situations – like watching the game on television. If we can't do that, we may try to *coordinate* our behavior with others. Notice how many people leave the game early, if the score is not close. As a last resort, we may become *aggressive*.

A third reason for feeling crowded relates to **overstaffing** – too many people for too few jobs – or **understaffing** – not enough people to serve the needs of customers. With the second generation of the "baby-boomers" in the late 1940s, there were too few teachers in the 1960s and 1970s (understaffing). Classes were overcrowded, and teachers were overworked. More recently, with the boom gone, there have been too many teachers (overstaffing). Some schools have closed, leaving those (who have trained for years to be teachers) alienated and without jobs. Similarly, the influx of tourists in the winter leaves cities in the Southwest understaffed, leading to such things as long lines in the grocery stores. The flight of these tourists in the summer leaves these same cities overstaffed, so it is hard to find employment during the summer. One reaction to this is to create territorial boundaries to exclude unwanted outsiders. This is why people in the United States want to stop illegal immigration of those who compete for scarce jobs (overstaffing) or require services from already overburdened organizations (understaffed).

I hope understanding why you feel crowded may reduce your discomfort — or at least help you seek remedies other than aggression.