

he had relinquished his dreams for a Wall Street salary, for a chance to stop feeling “poor.” Is it any wonder that family practice physicians, who make an average of \$160,000 a year, are in short supply?*

CAN WE DO anything about this problem of relativity?

The good news is that we can sometimes control the “circles” around us, moving toward smaller circles that boost our relative happiness. If we are at our class reunion, and there’s a “big circle” in the middle of the room with a drink in his hand, boasting of his big salary, we can consciously take several steps away and talk with someone else. If we are thinking of buying a new house, we can be selective about the open houses we go to, skipping the houses that are above our means. If we are thinking about buying a new car, we can focus on the models that we can afford, and so on.

We can also change our focus from narrow to broad. Let me explain with an example from a study conducted by two brilliant researchers, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Suppose you have two errands to run today. The first is to buy a new pen, and the second is to buy a suit for work. At an office supply store, you find a nice pen for \$25. You are set to buy it, when you remember that the same pen is on sale for \$18 at another store 15 minutes away. What would you do? Do you decide to take the 15-minute trip to save the \$7? Most people faced with this dilemma say that they would take the trip to save the \$7.

Now you are on your second task: you’re shopping for

*Of course, physicians have other problems as well, including insurance forms, bureaucracy, and threats of lawsuits for malpractice.