

Decision-making Made Easy, Part I

Most people struggle with making decisions and this is particularly true for people who have clutter, hoarding, or time management difficulties. The hardest part of making decisions is clearing out one's emotions so that facts and reality shine through.

In this newsletter and the next one, let's talk about a process to make decision-making easy, first by showing how to strip away the emotions that interfere with making a decision at all or making the best one, and second, by discussing some of the different methods for analyzing decisions and when they are most useful.

Difficulty making decisions results from many causes:

- lack of information
- difficulty assessing reality versus emotional distortions
- difficulty assessing importance, validity, or legitimacy of information
- difficulty assessing priority or weighting of potential options

Lack of information is often a secondary issue that results from making assumptions and emotional confusion. If we were not deceived by the emotions roiling around in our brains we would more easily perceive that more needs to be understood and would seek out sufficient information to make a good decision. Sometimes we make assumptions so quickly that we do not even realize that we have done so, thus it is hard to find and correct them.

Our self-talk, the constant mental babbling about everything and nothing that goes on in our heads from the time we wake up until we go to sleep, blinds us to reality. Our self-talk is made up of poorly digested fragments of reality filtered through emotions built up during our entire lives and the physical tensions that result from these emotions and our reactions to situations: our "baggage" that we bring into every transaction that we ever do. These tension or emotional complexes largely dictate our every thought, belief, and feeling. In most cases, we can't see reality clearly enough to make good decisions until we remove this debris.

Before we can clear away our filters, we have recognize what they are. The most common ones are fear, feeling like a failure, feeling inferior, being angry or hurt, desire, jealousy, but many others are possible. These filters manifest not only as actions, but as states of the body. Even when an emotion has subsided from our consciousness (most negative emotions are experienced only briefly, if at all, as we quickly rationalize away or deny them), its impact continues to exist in the body. Effects on the body can range from the subtle and microscopic but still very powerful, such as hormonal changes or narrowing of the arteries, to the visible and immediately painful, such as spasms or the back going out.

Once we realize that our thoughts and emotions have an adverse impact on our bodies and minds, there is a great deal that we can do about it:

- Begin a regular relaxation or meditation practice to reduce or remove the adverse effects of negative emotions and resist the pull of negativity in future situations. Being relaxed and calm helps to make better decisions. Writing is often a safe and effective way to explore and calm thoughts and emotions.
- Engage in body therapies such as massage, yoga, exercise or other forms of bodywork to remove or release physical tensions that block experiencing the world without filters or distortions and interfere with making good decisions.
- Monitor your thinking and actively combat all negative thoughts that arise. Catching the use of “loaded” words and phrases to describe ourselves, other people, events, or situations and stopping them is particularly rewarding. Loaded words have intense or subtle emotional content that block seeing reality. The presence of a judgmental word or phrase indicates that a thought has emotional rather than rational origin.

Loaded words that pop into your mind should be subjected to the most objective analysis possible. The first question to ask is “is this thought beneficial?” If not, best dismiss it. Negative self-assessments are harmful rather than beneficial, and do not work as a motivational tool. All of us respond more effectively and constructively to inspiration than to criticism.

The greatest tool for overcoming the loaded words in our thoughts and decisions is the concept of “Fair Witness” described by Robert Heinlein in his novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The Fair Witness is someone who objectively observes events without making assumptions, speculations, inferences, extrapolations, or conclusions. In the book, people underwent special training to acquire this skill. We don’t have such training programs but we can discipline our minds to become vastly more objective.

For any thought that comes into your mind about yourself or anyone else or for any decision you need to make, there are a series of questions based on the Fair Witness concept that can be applied to discover the truth:

- Is this information or thought true? What evidence proves that it is true? What evidence goes against it?
- Is this thought or information a comprehensive description of the person or situation? If it only references a limited segment, what information is missing?
- How much can be legitimately concluded from the available information? Is any part of the information speculation or inference?
- What assumptions have been made based on the information or on gaps in the information? How can assumptions be tested to determine whether they are true?
- How much of the information is based on input from other people? What is the evidence that their assertions are true? Strength of assertion does not equal validity or truth.
- Do any inferences from the information hold up under rules of logical reasoning? To the clarity required by Occam’s Razor (the simplest solution is the most likely to be correct)?

- How important is the thought or decision? What are the consequences of making or not making a decision or postponing it, or of believing a particular thought?
- What is the priority of this decision relative to other decisions or actions that are needed?

You probably do not need to answer all these questions to identify much better solutions than are possible without them.