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Decision Making And Problem Solving

Emotions Aren't the Enemy of Good Decision-Making

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Summary. Too often, when we need to make a difficult decision, we rush through it to avoid sitting with uncomfortable emotions. But channelling those emotions — a process the author calls “emotional bookending” — can help us ensure that we’ve correctly identified the... [more](#)

I recently gave a keynote address at Cornell University about how to better ensure the success of the decisions we make. I began by polling the audience of about 2,000 people to gauge whether they worry about making mistakes when they face a big decision. A whopping 92% of attendees responded yes.

I then asked the audience to supply one or two words to describe the kind of mistakes that they worry about making. The top responses, captured in a word cloud, showed that many of us worry that we rely too much on our gut or our instinct. Specifically, the audience members worried about moving too quickly; being hasty, impetuous, or impulsive; and making emotional decisions.



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If so many of us worry that we make mistakes by making decisions too quickly, why do we do it?

When we're faced with difficult and complex decisions, we typically experience difficult and complex emotions. Many of us don't want to sit with these uncomfortable feelings, so we try to get the decision making over with. But this often leads to poor decisions. We may not truly solve the problem at hand, and we often end up feeling worse. It's an unproductive feedback loop that bookends our decisions with negative feelings.

These emotional bookends, however, can be your secret weapon in making better decisions. The process is as simple as taking the time to identify 1) the emotions you feel as you face your decision, and 2) the emotions you want to feel as you're looking at your decision in the rearview mirror. What do you see? How is your life better for a satisfying decision outcome?

This four-step exercise allows our thinking, or "wizard brain," to check and channel our emotional, or "lizard brain," so that we don't make reactive choices. Here's how it works.

1. Identify the decision you need to make.

When we're trying to solve a thorny problem, we often have to sort through a lot of conflicting information — in addition to our feelings. So the first thing to do is to identify what decision you need to make.

Take Charlie, for example. He created a technology to improve hearing while earning his PhD. Now CEO of a neurobiology startup, he's passionate and knowledgeable about everything to do with his invention. But he doesn't have a business background, and he's facing

some important business decisions: How does he best use the money he's already raised to move his product to market? How much is it reasonable to spend to develop and test a minimally viable product? How can he raise additional money for his fledgling startup?

Charlie's funders want him to finish his clinical trial and build a product to test in a pilot program. He wants to do right by his investors and meet what he perceives as their very short timeline.

Some of Charlie's advisors and investors have been urging him to find a business-savvy partner. The decision Charlie needs to make is whether he should hire a cofounder with a business background to help him tackle these problems.

2. Identify how you feel about the decision you have to make.

Consider your emotions as you contemplate making a big decision. What is the dominant emotion you are feeling? Is it fear? Anxiety? A sense of being overwhelmed or perhaps excitement at the opportunity ahead? Are your feelings based on previous experiences or other sources of information?

Naming our feelings can help create a little space between our emotions and our actions. Gaining that distance allows us to examine the emotion, and to acknowledge feeling it, without letting the emotion drive the decision, replacing our conscious thought and agency.

Charlie believes deeply in his product and wants to see this wonderful technology helping people in the world. He feels stuck and unsure how to resolve the decision. He feels anxious and hesitant about his other stakeholders. He is getting conflicting advice from investors and advisors, with some pushing hard to bring on a business-minded partner

and others insisting that he can do it himself if he can be more organized with his time.

Creating the distance to identify that he felt “stuck” was a game changer for Charlie. It helped him realize that, as the CEO, he wasn’t stuck at all; instead, he was the sole decision maker. He also realized that “stuck” wasn’t the right word. Instead, he said he felt resistance. When I pressed him that resistance is not an emotion, but rather a psychological reaction, he was able to analyze further. What he really felt, he said, was discomfort. The clarification was eye opening. Now he could explore what he felt uneasy about.

3. Visualize your success and how it feels.

Imagine that you’ve made a successful decision. How do you feel now? Do you feel a sense of accomplishment or relief? Do you have a clearer direction for the future? Have you furthered your career, or perhaps strengthened your relationships?

When Charlie imagines hiring a cofounder, he realizes that the feeling of discomfort comes from worries about conflict stemming from having to share decision-making power with someone else. He thought he would feel confidence in the knowledge of the person he hired, but ultimately, he doesn’t want to share ownership of the vision that he has dreamed of and sweated over for so many years. Tuning in to his discomfort was a big aha moment, even though it had been there all along.

4. Apply the emotional bookends.

Now that you’ve examined your initial decision and the emotional bookends for it, consider: Have you correctly identified the decision you are making?

Applying the emotional bookending, Charlie realizes that he feels tied in knots because he has conflated several decisions. The decision he needed to make wasn't about hiring a cofounder or not, it was about whether he wants to share ownership of his business. He had assumed that in order to get the business acumen he needed he would have to bring on a partner, as many of the startups around him seem to have done.

But the exercise of emotional bookending helped him realize that there were other ways to get the business acumen that the company needs. He could hire someone who reports to him or hire a consultant. The business decision is a short-term decision; the partnership is a long-term decision. Not only had he conflated the decisions, he hadn't thought through the long-term implications of a partner.

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We think we don't have time to invest in the decision-making process — and we definitely don't want to dwell in the emotional discomfort, such as anxiety and frustration, that big decisions bring up. It can feel easier to turn complex decisions over to our emotions — and our lizard brain.

Calling on our wizard brain sounds like magic, but it's not. It requires doing the hard work of slowing down to see the lizard: to name and sit with our emotions. Calling on the wizard brain puts us in partnership with our emotions rather than driven by them.

Emotional bookending helps you name and tolerate your emotions, instead of burying them or running away from them, so that you can better identify — and make — the real decision, the right decision to help you move into your future with clarity and confidence.

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Cheryl Strauss Einhorn is the founder and CEO of Decisive, a decision sciences company using her AREA Method decision-making system for individuals, companies, and nonprofits looking to solve complex problems. Decisive offers digital tools and in-person training, workshops, coaching and consulting. Cheryl is a long-time educator teaching at Columbia Business School and Cornell and has won several journalism awards for her investigative news stories. She's authored two books on complex problem solving, *Problem Solved* for personal and professional decisions, and *Investing In Financial Research* about business, financial, and investment decisions. Her new book, *Problem Solver*, is about the psychology of personal decision-making and Problem Solver Profiles. For more information please watch Cheryl's [TED talk](#) and visit areamethod.com.



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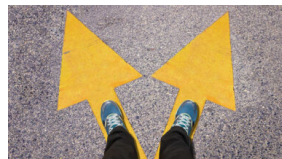


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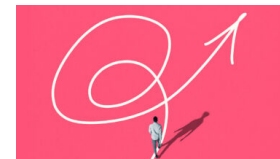
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