

Tips for dealing with decision problems

Making decisions usually involves a process made up of several steps, which are discussed in the following. They are not a fixed order; at every point you may have to go through previous steps again. As a general rule, the choice to put off a decision is also a decision with consequences.

1. Clarify the issue

Try to be as clear as possible about what you are trying to decide. For example, are you trying to answer the question "What career do I want to choose?" or is it more like "Do I want to continue with my current course?" If you have more than one decision to make, put them in order of which one you want to make first. The clearer the question you focus on, the more purposeful you can be in answering it.

2. Collect options and information

Clarify what your options are and collect information about them. Use different avenues to collect information:

- **Talk:** Talk to friends, relatives, people you know.
- **Try it out:** Get a sense of the possible alternatives (by visiting a lecture from the other course of studies, for example).
- **Expert knowledge:** Take advantage of the knowledge experts have by utilizing offers available (by making an advising appointment, for example).

If there are a lot of options available, it is usually impossible to gather all the available information. In this case, preliminary considerations such as the following can help:

- How much time can I/do I want to take to collect information?
- What criteria are relevant to my decision?
- What requirements should be met according to the criteria I have identified?
- Which options do not fulfill these requirements and can already be ruled out?

3. Structuring information

You should structure and evaluate the information you have gathered. Writing down your thoughts is very important as it helps to organise the information and your own thoughts and allows you to look at them from a distance. The following may be helpful:

- **List of pros and cons:** Collect the short- and long-term positive and negative consequences and compare them.
- **Decision matrix:** Give points to each possible option depending on how well it fulfills the previously identified criteria and decide how important each criterion is (1 = not very good/important, 10 = very good/important). Multiply the points you gave to each option by the importance of the criterion, and then add up the points for each alternative option.

Consider whether you can make a decision or rule out some of the options after this step. It is not uncommon for people to be torn between alternatives, even after they have carefully gathered and structured information. If this is the case, you may want to start looking at your unconscious preferences and inhibiting thoughts.

4. Detecting subconscious preferences

We are not always consciously aware of our own preferences. This can explain why an option can look really good after rational consideration, but still leave us feeling unconvinced. This is called intuition or gut instinct, and often makes us prefer an option for a single good reason, although it has many drawbacks and seems unwise after rational consideration. We get stuck between intuition and reason. Studies have shown that relying on your intuition can be wise in particular cases, such as when a limited amount of information is available or when you are thinking about something whose consequences are hard to predict (Gigerenzer, 2008).

You can identify your subconscious preferences with the following tricks:

- **Draw lots among the possible options:** Focus on how you feel when you open the lot. Does the decision feel right or do you wish you had drawn another?
- **Pretend:** Just decide on a specific option for a period of time and act accordingly. For example, you can study a subject for a single semester.
- **Imagine:** Close your eyes and imagine what your life would be like if you chose one of the options. How would you feel? What do you do? What are you thinking?

5. Exposing obstructive thoughts

Errors in reasoning can be another cause of problems in decision making. These are thoughts that are neither helpful nor realistic, but are negatively colored. They lead to negative emotions such as fear and can interfere with the decision-making process. Therefore, it can be very helpful to identify and challenge your negative thoughts and develop more helpful alternative thoughts.

Typical errors in reasoning		More helpful and appropriate thoughts
Black-and-white thinking	You believe there is only one correct decision among your options. Failing to identify it would be catastrophic, you think.	Usually there is no correct decision. Most options have advantages as well as disadvantages.
Predicting the future	You want to have 100% certainty before you make your decision, you cannot make a decision unless you have it.	It is only rarely possible to predict all of a decision's consequences. Usually, you won't have 100% certainty when you make a decision.
Overlarge responsibility	You are convinced that you will never forgive yourself if you make a wrong decision.	You make the decision to the best of your knowledge and belief. If the decision turns out to be unfortunate, remind yourself that it was impossible to foresee all the possible consequences when you made the decision.
Exaggerating the finality of the decision	You convince yourself that this decision is decisive for your whole life path. Making a wrong decision would be horrible, because then your life would be ruined.	It can be very unpleasant if you are unhappy with your choice, but that does not mean you will be unhappy for the rest of your life. You can try to reverse your decision or examine how you can make the best out of your situation.

Literature:

Gigerenzer, G. (2008). *Bauchentscheidungen. Die Intelligenz des Unbewussten und die Macht der Intuition*. Goldmann.