

# sort your life out



# DECISIONS

**The first step to getting the things you want out of life is this: Decide what you want.**

Ben Stein

**What precedes all** behaviours, actions and performances? What turns a dream into a reality? The answer is decisions. Your decisions determine what you think, how you feel, what you do and who you ultimately become. But are we really aware of our choices and do we always make the right decision?

Throughout this series we have contemplated and deliberated over what we really want, questioned our beliefs and labored over goal setting and realising our dreams. All of which culminated with our last article where we asked you to contemplate change. However, none of the above are possible without considering your choices and making that all important

decision. From the very offset, it's important to remember that everyday we are confronted with choices and opportunities to make decisions. These can vary from what to eat for dinner tonight, what clothes to wear for work, to more important life changing resolutions and for some, possibly life and death decisions.

**The more alternatives, the more difficult the choice.**

Abbe 'D' Allanival

One of the benefits of an open market economy is a greater variety of product and subsequently a superior range of choice. For instance, it is reckoned that the average supermarket stocks over 30,000 products and each year this figure is added too. A walk down any store aisle will reveal the myriad of choices that

confront us when doing the weekly shop. Overlaid on top of that are the constant reminders in the media of what constitutes a healthy diet, which can clash with our preferred eating options. Add to this our ethical choices we now have to consider, should we buy organic, fair trade and take into account food miles etc. combine this with TV chefs and the inevitable throng of cookery books, not forgetting price, it is easy to see how our weekly shop leaves us bewildered and frazzled. Little wonder that so many of the population stick to eating the same food week in week out.

David Shanks, a psychology professor and the co-author of *Straight Choices*, believes that **"So much choice makes decision-making increasingly complex. We feel bad that every time we do make a choice"**. Rather like the buffet table at a wedding reception, with so much to choose and all so tempting and

free! We can be left feeling dissatisfied because we may have missed out on other opportunities and possibly left unhappy with what we have chosen. I know I can empathise with this predicament, can you?

So choice can be a source of pressure, disappointment, stress and further more our choices can often influence our later decisions. 'Once bitten twice shy', 'tried it once and didn't like it!', are common retorts to previous poor decisions. Nevertheless there are also positive outcomes, I'm sure you can think of a restaurant meal or an amazing experience that motivated you to go back for more. So experience can sway our choices, as can information and advice. But what of gut feeling, does that have any influence on what we elect or reject?

I'm reminded of a story of a man in love with two women. With such a dilemma, he sought the advice of an old friend. He was instructed to create a scorecard of the pros and cons of each woman and then choose. This he did, but to his surprise something unexpected happened. He rejected the rational choice, because he realised that 'his heart had already decided for him' – in the favour of the woman with the lower total.

Listening to our hearts, the power of intuition and the art of thinking without thinking are within us all, however we do not always recognise it, or provide it with the credence it so deserves. In Malcolm Gladwell's book, BLINK, this point is further reinforced. He sets out to convince the reader that decisions made quickly can be just as good as those that have been deliberated over and over and provides evidence to back up this point.

**If we are to learn to improve the quality of the decisions we make, we need to accept the mysterious nature of our snap judgments.**

Malcolm Gladwell

As with the man who wanted to choose his partner, we all make decisions by following our heart or by gut feeling. Falling in love proves that point, although we may have a pre conceived ideal partner in mind, no tick box will bestow us a spouse, our heart will always rule our head. Buying our house is another time when we rely on our instincts, although we may have researched the markets, set aside a budget, have a wish list and taken financial advice. When buying a home we will often resort to how a place 'feels' when making a decision

Snap decisions, although made in an instant, are made with because of our ability to rapidly acquire knowledge and sift through information, with our mind

acting as a filter. When meeting someone for the first time we are not always aware where our first impressions come from or exactly what they signify. The way we see the world and every thing in it is based on our experiences in the past. At the same time, our expectations of the future are formed by what we already know. We have become products of all our experiences and perhaps subconsciously we've come to believe nothing can ever be any different.

One of our major problems is that for most we fail to distinguish what choices lay before us and instead we perceive options that are based on our past experiences. It can become all too easy to judge people's appearance and behavior purely in terms of our own experience of whom they might remind us of, or we might regard a particular activity on the basis of our experience of it. Can it really be that we have become so practised at doing what we have always done that we are able to condition ourselves into thinking we never have a choice in how we define ourselves.

**In my house I'm the boss, my wife is just the decision maker.**

Woody Allen

This particularly applies for those of us with habits that we wish to break, as we have become all too susceptible to running over the same patterns of thought and behaviour again and again. A simple explanation for this is that one of the main functions of the brain is to save time by making short cuts, grouping things together into sets and generalising the contents. For instance

**Time for a break = time for a cigarette  
Cup of tea = and a biscuit  
Watch a good film = box of chocolates**

This is the habit that makes all other habits possible. Most of the time this way of behaving serves us well, it becomes a reflex action. For instance, we know when we hear the sound of an approaching siren, that its time we get out of the way. Once you start to notice your responses, you can begin to choose. The one pattern that will let you change all other habits is the habit of noticing how automatic many of our choices are and then having the power to choose to do something different. Devoid of awareness we don't even realise we have a choice.

### MAKE THAT CHOICE

As previously highlighted, a simple technique for making the right decision is to take a sheet of paper, draw a line down the middle so that you have two columns. Next list all the positive things about your

decision in the left hand column and all the negative things in the right hand column.

It is important to include any advantages and potential that may arise under the positive column. In the negative column list any unconstructive implications and any downbeat feelings you may experience.

Once completed, take a good long look at both columns.

Which column has the most things listed? If there are negative things listed, can they be overcome or are they simply unmanageable?

By now you will have a strong sense for which choice to make and it will be very doubtful for you to regret it because you have investigated and acknowledged all aspects of the process in making your decision.

Bear in mind whatever you choose there will be a consequence; it's inevitable and cannot be avoided. If the process of writing a list is too arduous, just go with your first instinct and learn to trust that instinct. Failing all else just toss a coin and stick with it.

**Decisions, decisions, decisions. Love them. Choose fast. The less you agonise, the more you decide, the better you get. Practise being freed up around decisions. Don't think wrong/right. Think consequences. All decisions have them. Not all decisions are equal.**

Fiona Harold

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