

Deciding Under Pressure: For the Person Helping

When someone finds a decision difficult - a guide for the person helping them

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Before You Start

Someone has asked you to help them while they work through a difficult decision. That is not a small thing. They have chosen you because they trust you to be present, open with them, and careful with what they share.

This guide is a companion to their own guide, Deciding Under Pressure, and to the Decision Cycle questions they are working through. It does not replace either. It explains how you can help at each step, and what to avoid.

You do not need to read all of it before you start. Read this opening section, skim the rest once, then turn to the relevant step when you reach it together. Some difficulties are not tied to one step, such as the person wanting to go back, being unable to commit, revisiting a decision already made, doubting their own judgement, seeking reassurance, or becoming very anxious. These are covered in "Six Difficult Moments", near the end of this guide.

A WORD FIRST

This guide is designed to help with decisions, not with anxiety itself. It is not a therapy tool, and you are not being asked to act as a therapist. If the person's anxiety affects many areas of their life, not just this decision, it may help them to seek professional support alongside yours.

What your role is

Your role is to help the person work through their own thinking. It is not to provide the answer, take over the process, or rescue them from discomfort. The Decision Cycle exists because a structured approach applies judgement more reliably than unaided intuition. Your job is to help them stay in that structure, not to shortcut it.

In practice, that means asking questions rather than giving answers, reflecting back what you hear, helping them notice when they are looping rather than deliberating, and being present without taking charge.

This can be harder than it sounds, especially if you have a clear view of what they should do. Hold that view lightly. Use it as a check on your own thinking, not as a destination to steer them towards.

What your role is not

- You are not being asked to make the decision, or to tell the person what you would do in their position.
- You are not being asked to protect them from difficult realisations that the questions may bring.
- You are not being asked to reassure them that everything will be fine.
- You are not being asked to push them towards a conclusion faster than the process allows.

If you find yourself doing any of these, pause and ask yourself: "Am I helping this person think, or am I trying to manage their discomfort, or my own?"

Understanding decision anxiety

If someone has asked for your help, decisions probably feel harder for them than for most people. What looks like indecisiveness from the outside is usually something more specific.

Anxiety leads people to overestimate the chance of bad outcomes, to underestimate their capacity to cope with them, and to overestimate the chance of others noticing and thinking worse of them. It can make a decision feel much larger, riskier and more permanent than it is. The person is not being irrational. They are responding to a real sense of threat that their mind has created around the decision.

This guide is designed to help with this. Often the most useful thing you can do is to keep gently returning them to the step they are on, rather than letting the conversation spiral into general worry.

Deliberating versus looping

The person's guide focusses on an important distinction, the difference between deliberating and looping. With deliberating, something is considered, noted, and the process continues. With looping, the person goes back over the same ground without resolution.

Because you are outside the decision, you are well placed to notice looping. If the conversation keeps returning to the same worry or question after it has been dealt with, that is looping. You can point it out gently: "I notice we keep coming back to this. Do you think it has already been covered?" A quiet observation like that helps more than engaging with the content of the loop.

Time and settling

The person's guide suggests a time for each step, usually 10 to 30 minutes. The times are guides, not rules, but if a step runs much longer, it may be a sign of looping.

Their guide also has two short settling exercises, slow breathing and a see-hear-feel grounding exercise, which they can use at any point. You can do either of them together. Both are described under "When anxiety is very high", near the end of this guide.

STEP 1 **Frame the Decision**

Step 1 asks the person to write down what they are deciding, not a tidied-up version, but the decision as it first came to them. Then, it asks whether it is the right question, what earlier decisions can teach them, the scale of the decision and its fixed constraints, who else is affected, whether now is the right time, and what success would look like.

How you can help

Ask: "Can you tell me what the decision is, in your own words?" Then listen without correcting.

If they are struggling to frame it, ask: "What is it that you feel you need to decide?", rather than offering a frame yourself. Their words matter here. They tell you what the decision means to them.

If they jump ahead to options or solutions, gently redirect them: "I think Step 1 asks you to frame the question first. What is the decision needed here?"

If writing it down seems to make the anxiety worse, that is normal. Writing a worry makes it finite. It may feel more real before it feels more manageable.

If they have notes from earlier decisions, or remember a time they coped with something hard, encourage them to write that down too. It is evidence of their capacity to cope.

What to avoid here

Do not reframe the decision for them. If their framing seems unclear or wrong to you, put it as a question: "I'm not sure I fully understand the decision. Would it help if we looked at it together?"

STEP 2 Explore the Evidence

Step 2 asks the person to find out what they know and what they do not know, how reliable each piece is, what further information they need and by when, whether their evidence, resources and assumptions hold up, and what has happened to other people in similar situations.

How you can help

Help them to tell the difference between the information they need and the information they are seeking because they are anxious. A useful question: "If you had to decide now without finding this out, would you be making a much worse decision?" If the answer is probably not, it may be reassurance-seeking rather than research.

Their guide asks them to sort their worries into practical ones, where there is something to find out or do, and hypothetical ones, the what-ifs that no information can settle. You can help with the sorting: "Is that something you could check, or is it a what-if?"

Keep an eye on time. If the research is growing rather than narrowing, say so: "I wonder if we are raising more questions than we are answering. Is there a point where we have enough to move on?"

What to avoid here

Watch for reassurance-seeking. If they keep checking the same sources, returning to the same question, or asking you the same thing in different ways, that is not information-gathering. Saying gently, "I think you have covered this already", helps more than providing the reassurance.

STEP 3 Challenge Your Thinking

Step 3 asks the person to test their thinking. This includes whether the frame is right, which assumptions matter most, what the strongest argument against their current direction is, which biases may be at work, what happens next and then after that, and what the most probable cause of failure would be. It is the step that can raise anxiety more than any other, because it brings doubts into the open.

How you can help

Some discomfort at this step is expected. Your job is to help them keep going long enough to do the thinking, rather than skipping the step or rushing through it.

If their thinking on a question seems to be spiralling rather than progressing, suggest the wording from their guide: "I notice I am thinking (or doubting) that [X] is true." It puts distance between them and the thought without dismissing it.

Their guide lists eight thinking patterns that anxiety brings, such as catastrophising, fortune telling, mind reading and needing certainty. If you recognise one in what they are saying, you can ask, "Do you think that might be one of the patterns in your guide?"

Ask: "Is this step raising useful doubts, things you had not considered, or is it making you feel that everything is doomed?" Useful doubts should be written down as part of their Step 3 answers, so they can be dealt with. The second kind is anxiety, not a finding, and pointing out the difference can help.

If they are visibly distressed, pause and do one of the settling exercises together before continuing.

What to avoid here

This is the step where well-meaning helpers can give false reassurance, such as "I'm sure it will be fine", "You're overthinking this", "I wouldn't worry." Responses like these cut the step short. The person needs to complete the challenge, not be rescued from it.

STEP 4 Weigh the Options

Step 4 asks the person to list every realistic option, including doing nothing, to compare them against the success criteria they set in Step 1, and to identify a front-runner and the alternative they would switch to.

How you can help

If they seem stuck on a few options, ask: "Are there any other ways this could go? What would a completely different approach look like?"

If they are producing many options but not settling on a preference, help them to compare rather than to add more: "Of these, which one is best supported by what you have found so far?" Searching further for something better, after finding options that meet their needs, is what their guide calls maximising.

Remind them of their success criteria from Step 1. They were set before the options were known, so they are a steadier guide than how each option feels today.

Their guide suggests asking what they would tell a friend. You can ask it directly: "If someone else came to you with this situation and these options, what would you say to them?"

What to avoid here

Do not push them towards the option you would choose. If they are stuck between two options, the coin flip in "Six Difficult Moments" is designed for that situation.

STEP 5 Assess the Risks

Step 5 asks the person to assess the risks of their leading option. This includes their first sense of the risk and the cost of not deciding, the realistic range of outcomes, what could cause things to go wrong and how to prevent it, how reversible the option is, how they will respond to each risk, and an overall risk verdict. It can feel overwhelming, because it focuses attention on what could go wrong.

How you can help

If one risk is causing intense anxiety, work through the four questions in their guide together. What is the worst realistic outcome, not the worst imaginable? How probable is it, really? If it happened, could they get through it? Would it still feel this significant in a month, or a year?

Help them tell risk assessment from catastrophising. Risk assessment asks: "What could go wrong, and how probable is it?" Catastrophising says: "The worst will happen, and I will not cope." One is a question. The other is a conclusion.

You can also ask: "What are the risks of not deciding, or of choosing the alternative?" Doing nothing has risks too, and they are easy to overlook.

What to avoid here

Do not play down risks to reduce their distress. Saying "I'm sure that won't happen" is not a risk assessment. It is reassurance. Help them assess the risk accurately, which means taking it seriously enough to look at it, and not dismiss it.

STEP 6 Test Your Values

Step 6 asks whether the leading option reflects what matters most to the person, by testing it through the eyes of someone they respect, their future self, the people affected, and the fairness and ethics of the situation. It also asks what precedent the option sets, and ends with a values verdict.

How you can help

If they are struggling to say which values are involved, ask: "What would choosing this say about you, or about what you care about?"

A tension between two values that both matter is normal. If it is distressing them, you can say so: "It sounds as though both of these values are important for you. That tension is common in big decisions, and it does not mean something is wrong. The Step 6 questions ask you to decide which one matters more in this situation, and to accept what that costs the other one."

Two other patterns can appear here. One is "should" thinking: "I should already know what to do." The other is anticipated regret: "I will regret this, so I should not choose it." If you hear either, ask whether it is a reason or a fear.

The "what would you tell a friend?" question is useful here too: "If someone you cared about faced the same conflict, what would you say to them?"

What to avoid here

Do not tell them which value should matter more. That is their judgement to make. They may have a general order of priority, but which value wins in this situation is still for them to decide.

STEP 7 Decide and Commit

Step 7 asks the person to bring everything together, to make the choice and state it in one sentence, to close the door on revisiting it, to decide who will hold them to it, and to plan who needs to be told. It is where deliberation ends and choice begins, and where avoidance can be strongest.

How you can help

If they want to go back, gather more information or revisit earlier steps, first ask: "Has something new come up, or does it just feel uncomfortable to decide?"

If they are stuck, invite them to say aloud, not write, what they think the decision is. Saying it first can make writing it less frightening.

Some people find that continuing to worry feels responsible, as though stopping would mean not caring. If you notice this, you can say: "I wonder if part of what makes it hard to stop is that stopping feels like not caring. But you have already done the careful work. The worry that is left is not improving the decision."

Help them write the conditions for reopening the decision narrowly. "If new information arrives that changes the situation materially" is a condition. "If I feel anxious about it" is not. Narrow conditions help the door to close.

You may be asked to be the person who holds them to the decision. If so, agree what that means, what they will tell you, and by when.

What to avoid here

Do not push them to decide before they are ready. But notice the difference between not being ready and avoiding. Ask yourself if there is something not yet dealt with in their answers, or are they looking for a reason to delay?

If they are writing very broad conditions for reopening, such as anything that feels uncertain, gently help them tighten them. Broad conditions will keep the door open.

STEP 8 Do and Deliver

Step 8 asks the person to turn the decision into action, including what needs to happen, in what order and by when, who can help, and how they will know whether it is working, with a date to review it.

How you can help

If the first actions feel too large, help break them down: "What is the smallest thing you could do today to move this choice forward?"

Anxiety about carrying out a decision is common. The fear can shift from "what if I choose badly?" to "what if I cannot carry it out?" If it arises, acknowledge it. The monitoring questions exist because things happen, situations change, plans adapt, and adapting is not failing.

If you are the person holding them to it, confirm the arrangement, what they will report back to you, and when.

What to avoid here

Do not let the monitoring plan become so detailed that checking it becomes a new source of worry. Monitoring is for noticing whether things are going broadly as expected, not for building a system of constant reassurance.

STEP 9 Reflect and Learn

Step 9 asks the person to come back once the decision has had time to show results, to judge the outcome against their success criteria, to judge the process separately, and to carry the lessons into their next decision.

How you can help

You may not be needed at this stage. Results can take a long time to show up, and things can move on quickly from a particular decision. In any case, this step can often work better with some time between the decision and its review.

Ask, "Have things had enough time to show what they are going to show?"

The central distinction here is between the quality of the decision and the quality of the outcome. A good decision can produce a disappointing outcome, just as a poor decision can produce a good outcome. We live in an uncertain world. Help them to look at the two aspects separately: "Did things go as you hoped? And, separately, was the process sound? Did you reason carefully with what you knew at the time?"

Be kind, but not lenient. If the process had weaknesses, pointing them out is useful. If the outcome was disappointing, give them time to say so. Do not hurry to cheer them up, or to move straight on to what happens next. Acknowledging the disappointment first can make it easier to learn from it.

What to avoid here

Be careful not to treat a difficult outcome as proof of a bad decision. Outcomes depend on things outside the person's control. If the process was sound, the decision was good, even if it did not produce the result they hoped for. Confusing the two teaches the wrong lessons.

Six Difficult Moments

Some difficulties are not tied to one step. As a helper, these are the ones you will meet most often.

When they want to go back instead of forward

Sometimes going back to an earlier step is right. New information has arrived, or something important was missed. But it can also be avoidance. Ask, "Has something changed, or does it just feel uncomfortable to move forward?" If nothing has changed except the anxiety, going back will not help. Suggest they write down what they feel is missing. If they cannot write it clearly, it is probably discomfort, not a gap in their knowledge or understanding.

When they cannot commit

Ask what, specifically, is stopping them, and encourage them to write the answer (not the worry in general, but the specific thing). Often, it is something already covered in their answers, or something that more deliberation cannot resolve.

THE COIN FLIP

If they are stuck between two options and more analysis is not helping, they can assign one option to heads and one to tails, and flip a coin. Ask them to notice their reaction. Relief probably points to the option they wanted. Disappointment, or wanting to flip again, is information too. The coin does not make the decision. Their reaction to it does. This only works once the earlier steps have been worked through.

When they keep revisiting a decision already made

Returning to the what-ifs after the door has been closed is draining for the person, and can be difficult for a helper to respond to well. The temptation is to engage with the content, to answer the doubt, or to provide reassurance. But engaging with the content feeds the loop.

Instead ask, "Have any of the conditions you wrote in Step 7 been met?" If not, you can say: "Then this is the decision, made carefully, and none of the conditions for going back have been met. The worry is real, but it is not new information." That is not dismissive. It is the truthful answer, and it helps more than engaging with each new version of the doubt.

When they doubt their own judgement

Sometimes what stops a person is not the decision, but a lack of trust in their own judgement. Chapter 12 of the book calls this self-trust. It is not certainty. It is believing they can work through the decision carefully, act on what they find, and manage if it goes wrong.

You can help by asking the questions in their guide: "Has this hesitation appeared with earlier decisions too?" "If someone you respect brought you this decision, with these facts, would you trust their judgement? If so, what makes yours different?" Reminding them of times they managed something hard can also help. You may remember those times better than they do.

When they are seeking reassurance rather than support

Reassurance-seeking looks like a request for support, but it works differently. Someone seeking support wants help to think. Someone seeking reassurance wants to be told everything will be fine.

Providing reassurance, however kindly meant, can strengthen anxiety. The person learns that their worry is only manageable with someone else's confirmation. When you notice the same question returning in different forms, you can say gently: "I notice we keep coming back to this, and I'm not sure more answers from me are what is needed. What did you write about this in your answers?" Turning back to their own answers helps because it is not you providing the reassurance.

When anxiety is very high

Occasionally the anxiety becomes too strong for the questions to be useful in that moment. The person may be visibly distressed, unable to focus, or caught in a spiral. This is not a failure of the process. It may mean the decision matters a great deal to them, or that they are tired or overloaded. Either way, the right response is to pause.

SLOW BREATHING

Breathe in for a count of four. Hold for four. Breathe out slowly for a count of six. Repeat at least three times. You can do it with them.

SEE, HEAR, FEEL - COUNTING DOWN FROM FIVE

With their eyes open, ask them to say five things they can see, five things they can hear and five things they can feel, such as the chair under them or their feet on the floor. Then four of each, then three, two and one. It is fine to repeat things. You can prompt them: "What can you see?"

The second exercise was adapted from a self-hypnosis technique by Betty Erickson and developed as a grounding technique by the therapist Yvonne Dolan (1991). Grounding exercises like it are widely used in practice, but they have not yet been tested in clinical trials.

Once they have settled, returning to the step is usually possible. If it is not, say so plainly and agree a time to come back, rather than letting the session drift into general worry.

A Note for You

Supporting someone through a difficult decision is quiet, attentive work. It does not look difficult, but it asks a lot. You may need to stay calm when they are anxious, without taking their anxiety on yourself; to have views of your own without imposing them, and to stay present in a process that may be slow and uneven.

Notice how you are finding it. If their anxiety is raising your own, or you find yourself frustrated or wanting to solve the problem to make the discomfort stop, it may be time to take a break, or to look after yourself as well.

You do not need all the answers, and you are not expected to have them. What you are providing is presence and structure by keeping the person in the process, saying what you notice, and staying steady yourself while they work through something hard. That is real and substantial support.

If their anxiety about decisions is severe, long-lasting, or interfering with daily life beyond this decision, it may be worth gently suggesting that professional support could help alongside yours, not instead of it. That is not a reflection on your role. Some difficulties need professional help, and suggesting it is itself a form of care.

Sources

The techniques in this guide adapt ideas from cognitive-behavioural therapy, acceptance-based therapy and decision research. It is an original application of those ideas, not a reproduction of them. It may not work for everyone.

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