

Deciding Under Pressure

When a decision feels difficult - a guide to working through the Decision Cycle

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Before You Start

This guide can be used alongside the Decision Cycle questions. It does not replace them. It is for the times when a decision feels bigger or harder than you think it should, and your usual way of working through it is not enough.

For each step, read the guidance here first, then work through the questions for that step. Where this guide fits is explained in Chapters 12 and 17 of the book *LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment*.

Some difficulties are not tied to one step, such as wanting to go back instead of forward, being unable to commit, revisiting a decision you have already made, or not trusting your own judgement. These are covered in "Four Difficult Moments", near the end of this guide. Turn to it whenever one of them stops you.

A WORD FIRST

This guide is designed to help with decisions, not with anxiety itself. It is not a therapy tool and it is not a substitute for professional support. If anxiety affects many areas of your life, not just this decision, please seek professional help.

Why decisions can feel harder for some people

For some of us, decisions can be much more difficult. What looks simple to others, can feel full of risk, uncertainty, or the fear of getting it wrong and the possible, subsequent embarrassment. If that sounds familiar, it is not a character flaw or a sign of weakness. It is the mind trying to protect you from an uncertain future, which is understandable.

Unfortunately, your mind is not always accurate about what is dangerous. Anxiety leads us to overestimate the chance of bad outcomes, to underestimate our capacity to cope with them, and to overestimate the chance of others noticing and thinking worse of us. This guide helps you to notice when that is happening, and to keep moving forward anyway.

Deliberating versus looping

It focusses on an important distinction, the difference between deliberating and looping.

Deliberating moves you forward, even if it is slowly. You consider something, you note it, you move on. Looping takes you back over the same ground without resolution: the same worry, the same question, the same fear, going in circles without arriving anywhere.

The two can feel similar. But deliberating reduces your uncertainty, while looping sustains it. A main aim of this guide is to help you to tell them apart.

Good enough is the goal

Research on decision-making has found that people who search for the best possible option are more anxious and less satisfied with their choices than people who look for a sound, good-enough one. Herbert Simon called the second approach satisficing.

The aim is not to find the perfect decision. There may not be one. You need to make a well-reasoned decision. The Decision Cycle questions will help you to reason well, and this guide will help you to trust that reasoning enough to act on it.

Why avoidance keeps decisions stuck

One reason decisions can become harder over time is a cycle of avoidance. When a decision feels threatening, the natural response is to stay away from it. That brings short-term relief, but the decision remains unresolved, and the next time it comes up your anxiety level is a little higher. Each time, the mind learns a little more that the decision is dangerous. Eventually, even approaching the subject can be distressing.

Working through the Decision Cycle's steps, even imperfectly, can overcome avoidance. It gives you a structured route through the decision, instead of leaving you alone to fight your way through. Your level of anxiety can decrease over time, even if it does not feel that way at first.

If anxiety arrives before you start - worry postponement

If anxious thoughts arrive before you have even started the Decision Cycle's questions, set a specific time later today, perhaps this evening, or in an hour. Tell yourself: "I am going to think about this properly at [time]. Right now, I am going to start Step 1."

This is not denial. It is scheduling. The difference between postponement and avoidance is intention: postponement sets a time to return, while avoidance hopes the feeling or the whole decision goes away. When the time arrives, come back to this guide.

Time limits

Each step below has a suggested time. It is not a pressure. It is a protection. When deliberation has no boundary, anxiety can fill the space. We all do things at a pace that suits us. Treat the times as guides, not rules, but if you find yourself spending much longer than suggested, notice it. It could be a sign of looping rather than deliberating.

Before you begin - two ways to settle

If you are anxious before you start, these short exercises can help. Use whichever suits you. Each takes a minute or two, and you can come back to them at any step.

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.

Slow breathing with a longer out-breath is one of the better-studied ways of calming the body's stress response.

SEE, HEAR, FEEL - COUNTING DOWN FROM FIVE

Keep your eyes open and rest them on one spot. Say to yourself, aloud or silently, five things you can see ("I see..."), five things you can hear ("I hear...") and five things you can feel ("I feel..." - the chair under you, your feet on the floor). Then four of each, then three, then two, then one. It is fine to repeat the same things. If you lose count, carry on from wherever you think you were.

This 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.

Both exercises work by moving your attention from an imagined future back to the present. Anxiety lives in anticipation. The present is usually more manageable.

STEP 1 **Frame the Decision**

Step 1 asks you to define the needed decision clearly. First, that means clearly defining the question you are answering and whether it is the right one. Then, what earlier decisions can teach you, the scale of this decision, and any constraints you cannot move. Next, who else is affected, whether now is the right time to decide, and what success would look like.

Suggested time: 10 to 20 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

Anxiety at this step often takes the form of wanting to solve the decision before you have fully defined it. You may find yourself jumping ahead to options or risks before the question is settled. Or you could be reluctant to write the decision down at all, as if writing it makes it uncomfortably real.

Writing it down

The first question asks you to write the decision as it first came to you, not tidied up and not reframed. That act is itself a technique. A worry held in your head has no shape and can grow without limit. A worry written on a page is finite. It has edges. There is something concrete for you to deal with.

So write it down. Do not judge what you have written. Just get it out of your head and onto the page.

If you have notes from earlier decisions, see what they can tell you. If you are reminded of a time you coped with something hard, write that down too. It is evidence of your capacity to cope. Don't ignore it.

Permission to move on

You do not need a perfectly-framed decision before moving on. Step 3 will test the frame. A rough statement of what you are facing is enough to start.

STEP 2 Explore the Evidence

Step 2 of the Decision Cycle wants you to find out what you know, and what you do not know. Next, to have some idea of how reliable each piece of what you know is. Then, to work out what further information you need and by when; to check your evidence, your resources and your assumptions; and to ask what has happened to other people in similar situations.

Suggested time: 15 to 30 minutes, spread over more than one sitting if needed.

What difficulty might feel like here

This step can set off what might be called the certainty trap. It's when you think that you cannot go on until you know enough. With anxious thinking, "enough" keeps moving further away. Every gap you fill can seem to open another. This search for certainty can go on indefinitely. It can be another form of avoidance.

Practical worries and hypothetical worries

Not every gap in the information you want matters as much as the next one. For each gap, ask: "If I had to decide now without filling this gap, would I make a much worse decision?" If the answer is "yes", then you need to fill it. If the answer is "probably not", you may be seeking certainty rather than information. Decide in advance how long you will spend finding things out, and stop when that time is up. Some information will always be missing. It is a condition of every real decision.

It also helps to sort your worries into two kinds.

- Practical worries are about something you could find out, check, change or prepare for. "I do not know whether I can afford this." "I have not asked what the process involves." These belong in the Step 2 questions, with an action and a date.
- Hypothetical worries are about imagined futures that no amount of information can settle. "What if something goes wrong that I have not thought of?" "What if I regret this?" More research will not resolve them, because they are about uncertainty itself, not missing facts.

SORTING YOUR WORRIES

List what is worrying you about this decision. Mark each one P (practical) or H (hypothetical). For each P, write what you will find out, from whom, and by when. For each H, write one line on why more information cannot settle it, then say to yourself: "This is a worry, not a fact. I have noted it." Keep the list nearby. If an H worry returns, you can tell yourself it's already been noted.

Notice too, the difference between gathering information and seeking reassurance. Information changes what you know. Reassurance-seeking (checking the same source again, asking the same person a second time, looking for confirmation that an option is safe) adds nothing new. It eases anxiety for a moment, then the anxiety returns. If more research is not changing your analysis, but is making you feel calmer for a while, it is reassurance-seeking. Recognise it and move on.

Permission to move on

Some gaps will remain when you move on. That is expected. The questions ask you to note the gaps you are accepting, not to remove all uncertainty.

STEP 3 Challenge Your Thinking

Step 3 asks you to test your thinking: whether the frame is right, which assumptions matter most, what the strongest argument against your current direction is, which biases may be at work, what happens next and then what happens after that, and then what the most probable cause of failure would be.

Suggested time: 15 to 30 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

This step can raise anxiety, and perhaps more than any other. It's because it brings doubt into the open. Questions about what could go wrong, and what you might be missing, can feel overwhelming if you are already anxious. You don't want a step that's meant to produce better thinking to cause a spiral of negative thinking and anxiety.

Thought labelling and a thinking-pattern check

So before you begin, use one of the settling exercises from the start of this guide. Slow breathing suits this step well.

As you work through the questions, when a thought feels difficult or intrusive, try putting it this way: "I notice I am thinking (or doubting) that [X] is true." This small change in wording can put distance between you and the thought. It does not dismiss the concern. It should remind you that a thought is a thought, not a fact.

Step 3 asks about cognitive biases, the reasoning errors we can all make, whatever our mood. The Bias Awareness Checklist covers those. Anxiety adds a different set of thinking patterns. Check whether any of these are present:

- Catastrophising. It's treating the worst outcome you can imagine as the most probable one. "If this goes wrong, everything will fall apart."
- Fortune telling. That's treating a prediction as a fact. "I know this will go wrong."
- All-or-nothing thinking is seeing only total success or total failure. "Either this works completely or it is a disaster."
- Mind reading. Here, it's assuming you know what others will think. "People will think I am crazy."
- Emotional reasoning is using a feeling as evidence. "I feel anxious about it, so it must be wrong."
- Discounting past coping, where you disregard the time you managed something difficult. "That was different."
- Overly-responsible, where you hold yourself responsible for things outside your control. "If anything goes wrong, it will be entirely my fault."
- Needing certainty. That's treating the absence of certainty as a reason not to decide. "I cannot decide until I know for sure."

For each one of these that you recognise, say to yourself: "I notice I am [catastrophising] right now." Noticing a pattern does not mean your concern is wrong. It means the concern may be larger in your mind than the evidence supports.

Permission to move on

The purpose of this step is not to convince you that everything will go wrong. It is to make sure your thinking has been tested. If you have considered the risks and challenges and still want to go ahead, you are in a stronger position, not a more frightening one.

STEP 4 Weigh the Options

Step 4 asks you to list every realistic option, including doing nothing; to compare them against the success criteria you set in Step 1; and to identify a front-runner, with your reasons, and also the alternative you would switch to.

Suggested time: 10 to 20 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

More options can mean more anxiety. When there are many possibilities, the fear of choosing the wrong one can become paralysing. You may find yourself comparing endlessly, unable to settle on something, or drawn back to options you had already set aside in search of something better. That last pattern, searching for something better after you have already found options that meet your needs, is what researchers call maximising. It is the opposite of the good-enough approach that this guide recommends. Having high standards is not the problem. Searching without end is.

What would you tell a friend?

If someone you cared about brought you this decision, with the same circumstances and the same options, what would you advise them to do?

Most of us are more rational and more compassionate when advising others than when advising ourselves. The option that seems obvious from outside, can often become clouded from inside.

Write your answer. Then ask yourself, “what is stopping me from following that advice myself?”

Your success criteria from Step 1 can help here. You set them before you looked at the options, so they are a steadier guide to what is needed than how each option feels today.

Permission to move on

You do not need the perfect option. You need a front-runner. It’s a leading option that is better supported than the others at this point. That is all this step asks for.

STEP 5 Assess the Risks

Step 5 asks you to assess the risks of your leading option. This includes your first sense of the risk, 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, what it could do to your resilience, how you will respond to each risk, and finally, an overall risk verdict.

Suggested time: 15 to 30 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

This step can sometimes feel a little overwhelming. The questions are designed to bring risk into focus. That's what anxious thinking does already, but in an unstructured way. Left to itself, the anxious mind can treat every possible negative as equally probable and equally catastrophic. The questions are designed to counter that, though at first it may feel like the opposite.

Avoiding catastrophising - four questions

When a risk feels frightening, work through these four questions in order. Write your answers.

1. What is the worst realistic outcome? Not the worst you can imagine, but the worst that is probable given what you know.
2. How probable (likely) is that outcome, really? Give a considered estimate, not a feared one. "Anything is possible" is true, but not useful. Most feared outcomes are possible, not probable.
3. If it did happen, could I cope? Not easily, perhaps, and not without cost, but could I get through it? Think of difficult things you have faced before, and the people, resources and strengths you can call on.
4. Would this still feel as significant in a month? In a year? Some risks are serious and will matter for a long time. Others feel overwhelming because they are close. The fear is real, but its weight later may be smaller than it seems now. This question does not dismiss the risk. It helps you judge its size.

YOUR REVISED ASSESSMENT

Having worked through the four questions, write a short, revised statement of the risk. This is the version you take into the Step 5 questions. You want an accurate description, not a catastrophised one. You have not dismissed the risk. You have described it accurately.

For most people, most of the time, the answer to the third question is yes. We are often more resilient than we believe. Any doubts about our resilience can increase when we are frightened or anxious.

If you find yourself going back to one of the settling exercises at this point, that is fine. It means you are noticing what is happening.

Permission to move on

A decision does not need to be free of risk to be the right one. If you understand the risks, they are acceptable to you, and each has a response, that is what this step asks for. Then reach your risk verdict and move on.

STEP 6 Test Your Values

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

Suggested time: 15 to 20 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

This step can bring guilt, or a feeling that you are failing some moral test. It can also expose a conflict between two values that both matter to you, which can be distressing. Sometimes the difficulty is that people are not clear about what they value, and sometimes they feel they should value things differently from the way they do.

Two other patterns can appear here. One is "should" thinking. "I should already know what to do", "I must not make a mistake". Rules like these create pressure, not clarity. The other is anticipated regret. "I will regret this, so I should not choose it". The future-self test is useful, but an imagined future feeling should inform your decision, not stop you making it.

Values tension is normal

Many significant decisions involve a tension between values. Choosing one thing often means accepting less of another, such as freedom and security, loyalty and fairness, care for others and care for yourself.

The question is not which value matters more in general, but which matters more in this situation. The Step 6 questions ask you to say which values, and why.

The "what would I tell a friend?" question from Step 4 is useful here as well. What would you say to someone you cared about, who was facing the same conflict?

Permission to move on

No decision will satisfy every value. If the leading option fits with what matters most to you, and you can explain why you chose it, that is enough. Record your values verdict and move on.

STEP 7 **Decide and Commit**

Step 7 asks you to bring everything together, make the choice and state it in one sentence, close the door on revisiting it, decide who will hold you to it, and plan who needs to be told.

Suggested time: 10 to 20 minutes. If you find yourself spending much longer, read "When you cannot commit" in the Four Difficult Moments section, near the end of this guide.

What difficulty might feel like here

This is where avoidance is strongest. The fear of being wrong can make it feel safer to keep deliberating. But at this point, more deliberation rarely produces new information. It is often anxiety presenting itself as caution.

For some people, continuing to worry can feel responsible, as though not worrying would mean not caring about the outcome. If that sounds familiar, note that you have already done the careful work to reach this point. The worrying that remains is not improving your decision. It is adding to the cost of making it.

Closing the door is often the hardest part. If decisions are difficult for you, there is a strong pull to leave an exit open. In other words, to decide, but not quite finally.

Decision quality, outcome quality, and the conditions for reopening

A good decision can have a bad outcome, and a bad decision can have a good outcome. You cannot guarantee the outcome. You can reason carefully, weigh the evidence fairly, and make the best choice available with what you know at the time. That is what a good decision is. If you have worked through the earlier steps carefully, you have already made a good decision in that sense. Stating it then, is not a risk. It is the conclusion of the work you have done.

Use the slow breathing from the start of this guide. Then write the decision in one sentence. Do not keep rewording it. Let it stand.

The Commitment questions ask when it would be right to reopen the decision. Writing those conditions down clearly is what allows the door to close. If you know what would justify going back, you can stop looking for reasons to go back. Be strict. "If I feel anxious about it" is not a condition. "If new information arrives that changes the situation materially" is.

Accountability and telling others can make you feel exposed, because that makes the decision somewhat public. That is part of their value. Choose one person who will hold you to it, and plan who needs to hear first, using the questions or the Decision Communication Planner.

Permission to move on

You will not have certainty. No one does. What you have is a well-reasoned conclusion from a careful process, and the conditions under which you would reopen it. Everything else (the doubts, the second thoughts, the what-ifs) belongs under "already considered". Acknowledge them, set them aside, and move to Step 8.

STEP 8 Do and Deliver

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

Suggested time: 10 to 20 minutes.

What difficulty might feel like here

Anxiety about carrying out a decision is different from anxiety about making it, but they are closely related. Having decided, the fear can shift from "what if I choose badly?" to "what if I cannot carry it out?" The plan on paper can feel manageable. The plan in practice can feel daunting.

The smallest possible first step

The questions ask for your first three actions. If any of them feels too large, break it into a smaller piece. The question is not "how do I carry out this decision?" but "what is the one small thing I can do today that moves it forward?" Then do that.

Ask for help where you need it. The Help and Support questions are there because few decisions are carried out alone.

Monitoring (watching for the signals that things are, or are not, working) means you will find out early if something is going wrong. You are not committing to an outcome. You are committing to a plan with a watching brief, which is a more comfortable position than it may feel.

Permission to move on

Carrying out a decision will not go perfectly. That is to be expected. It's not a failure. The monitoring questions are there because plans need to adapt. Getting on with it is the job here, not perfecting it.

STEP 9 Reflect and Learn

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

Complete this step only after the decision has had time to show results.

What difficulty might feel like here

Second-guessing after a decision can be intense, particularly if the outcome has not been obviously positive, or is taking a while to emerge. The temptation is to conclude that a difficult outcome means a bad decision, or that you should have chosen differently. In our uncertain world, that's not always true.

Outcome versus process

You need to ask two separate questions: -

1. Was the outcome good (or did things go as hoped)?
2. Was the process good (or did I reason carefully, weigh the evidence fairly, and make the best choice I could with what I knew then)?

If the process was sound, you made a good decision, even if the outcome disappointed you. You cannot control outcomes. You can control your reasoning. Hold yourself accountable for that, not for bad luck or for good luck.

Be as kind to yourself in this review as you would be to a friend reviewing the same decision. Not lenient, but kind. There is a difference.

If you noticed any of the thinking patterns from Step 3 during this decision, record them. Next time, Step 1 will ask what your earlier decisions can teach you, and this will be part of the answer.

Permission to move on

This step is about learning, more than judging. Whatever the outcome from a decision, there is something useful to carry forward. Write it down and be done. You have completed the cycle.

Four Difficult Moments

Some difficulties are not tied to one step. They are patterns that can appear at any point.

When you 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, and a way of delaying the decision by finding reasons to revisit what is already settled.

Ask yourself whether something has changed, or does it just feel uncomfortable to move forward? If nothing has changed except your anxiety, going back will not help. It will give your anxiety more material. Write down what you feel is missing or wrong. If you cannot write it down clearly, it is probably discomfort, not a gap. Acknowledge the discomfort and move forward.

When you cannot commit

If you reach Step 7 and cannot state the decision (make the choice), ask what specifically is stopping you. Write the answer, not the worry in general, but the specific thing. Often, it turns out to be something the questions have already covered (in which case, reread what you wrote), or something more deliberation cannot resolve (in which case, more deliberation is not what you need).

THE COIN FLIP

If you are stuck between two options and more analysis is not helping, assign one to heads and one to tails, and flip a coin. Notice your reaction. If you feel relief, that is probably the option you wanted. If you feel disappointment, or want to flip again, that is information too. The coin does not make the decision. Your reaction to it does. Use this only when you are stuck. It is not a substitute for the steps.

When you have decided but keep revisiting

Revisiting a decision after it is made can be draining. The door has been closed, and yet the what-ifs keep coming to mind.

Go back to what you wrote in Step 7 about the conditions under which it would be right to reopen the decision. Have any of them been met? If not, the revisiting is not deliberating. It is looping. Call it that, or say to yourself (quietly or aloud), "I have made this decision. I made it carefully. I am not making it again."

When the obstacle is trusting yourself

Sometimes what stops you is not this decision, but a doubt about your own judgement. You may not trust yourself to make the call and be accountable for it, to know your own preference without checking it against other people's reactions, or to cope if it goes wrong. Chapter 12 in the book calls this self-trust.

Self-trust is not certainty. It does not mean knowing the answer in advance. It means believing you can work through the decision carefully, act on what you find, and manage the consequences if it goes wrong. Three questions can help:

- Has this hesitation appeared only with this decision, or with previous ones as well?
- If someone you respect brought you this decision, with these facts, would you trust their judgement to make it? If so, what makes yours different?
- What would you have to believe about yourself to decide this today?

If the hesitation occurs decision after decision, Part B of the Decision-Making Patterns and Hesitation tool may help, and a conversation with someone you trust may do more than any document can.

A Note to Close

If you have worked through the Decision Cycle with this guide, you have done something difficult. That's not only because the decision was hard, but because you did it while managing a mind that was working hard to protect you from uncertainty. You deserve credit for that.

If decisions often feel this difficult (or if this level of anxiety is present across many areas of your life, not just this decision and not just occasionally) it may be worth talking to someone such as a friend you trust, or a professional who works with people having this kind of difficulty. The techniques here are drawn from evidence-based approaches, but a document may not be enough.

If you are helping someone else through a decision like this, there is a companion version of this guide to assist you.

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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