

Decision-Making Patterns and Hesitation

Two self-checks: the patterns you bring to decisions, and why one decision has stalled

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These patterns are not flaws. Each carries a strength alongside a predictable cost.

This document has two parts, used at different times. Part A identifies the pattern you bring to decisions in general - work through it once, and you are unlikely to need it again for years. Part B identifies why one particular decision has stalled today - return to it whenever one does. You do not need to have completed Part A to use Part B.

A pattern is a way of deciding that recurs across many decisions. Unlike situational hesitation, it shows up whatever the topic. Most people tend towards one or more of them. Which sound most like you?

PART A Identify your patterns

Check any that sound like your usual way of deciding.

☐ The Perfectionist

Often stalls in overload: too much analysis, no clear stopping point

“I need the right answer, not just a good enough one.”

How it shows: The goalposts keep moving · More research always seems needed · The best option feels just out of reach

In the Decision Cycle: Loops through Steps 2-4; struggles to commit at Step 7 because no option feels fully adequate

☐ The Avoider

Prone to drift or stall: the decision simply does not get made

“Deciding means committing, and committing means I could be wrong.”

How it shows: Busyness with everything except the decision · “I’ll deal with it next week” · The decision quietly makes itself by default

In the Decision Cycle: Completes early steps but stalls at Step 7; the DRIFT hesitation type recurs across many decisions

☐ The Pleaser

Often defers: waits for a signal that others are comfortable before committing

“Other people’s reactions are part of getting the decision right.”

How it shows: Constant consultation but for reassurance, not information · Position shifts when others push back · Difficulty locating own preference independently

In the Decision Cycle: Step 6 (Test Your Values) is particularly hard; others’ values get conflated with personal values; seeks approval at Step 7

☐ The Worrier

Liable to stall in fear: cycles through worst-case outcomes without resolution

“Something could go wrong that I haven’t fully accounted for yet.”

How it shows: Loss aversion dominates upside thinking · Disproportionate time spent on worst-case scenarios · Waits for a certainty that never arrives

In the Decision Cycle: Step 5 (Assess the Risks) creates paralysis rather than clarity; the Fear hesitation type is chronic and extends far beyond Step 5

☐ The Ruminator

Often loops: returns to the same ground without moving forward

“If I think about it long enough, I will eventually find clarity.”

How it shows: Returns to the same questions without reaching new answers · Thinking feels productive but produces no movement · Mental exhaustion without resolution

In the Decision Cycle: OVERLOAD hesitation recurs even after sufficient information; also prone to DOUBT after acting, re-opening closed decisions

❑ The Overconfident

Rarely hesitates: the risk is insufficient analysis before committing, not delay

“I already know what the right answer is.”

How it shows: Analysis feels unnecessary because the conclusion already feels clear · Challenges from others are dismissed rather than considered · Surprised when outcomes diverge from expectations

In the Decision Cycle: Steps 2-5 are compressed or skipped entirely; Step 3 (Challenge Your Thinking) is the critical missed step; moves to Step 7 before the evidence base is adequate

❑ The Impulsive

Rarely hesitates: commits before the analysis is complete; doubt comes later

“I just need to decide and move forward.”

How it shows: Commits to the first viable option · Decides before sufficient information is gathered · Regrets decisions that a little more time would have improved

In the Decision Cycle: Rushes through Steps 1-4; often commits at Step 7 before Step 5 (Assess the Risks) is complete; Step 9 (Reflect and Learn) frequently reveals the same pattern repeating

❑ The Fatalist

Often drifts: the decision is left to chance or circumstance rather than consciously made

“What happens, happens. I’ll deal with whatever comes.”

How it shows: Leaves significant choices to chance or to others without engagement · Avoids stating a preference · Treats the outcome as something that occurs rather than something chosen

In the Decision Cycle: Steps 1 and 7 are the critical gaps. The decision is neither framed clearly nor consciously made; Step 9 reinforces the belief that outcomes were always outside their control

PART A Working with your patterns

For each pattern you identified, the strategies below are not about eliminating it. That rarely works. They are about using the strength deliberately while staying alert to when the same pattern starts to work against you.

THE PERFECTIONIST

Strength: Thoroughness and care - the Perfectionist rarely makes catastrophic mistakes

- Define “good enough” before you start. What threshold of confidence is required here?
- Set a hard deadline for deciding, not just for thinking.
- Ask: what would I decide with 80% of the information I’m still seeking?

What makes it worse: More research, more options, more time without a decision date

THE AVOIDER

Strength: Patience and non-reactivity - the Avoider rarely overreacts or decides in haste

- State the default outcome. What happens if you don’t decide? Is that acceptable?
- Set a decision date, not a review date but a specific day by which you will have chosen
- Ask: what am I protecting by not deciding?

What makes it worse: Giving yourself more time without a commitment to use it

THE PLEASER

Strength: Relational intelligence - the Pleaser builds consensus and considers impact on others

- Write the decision down privately before consulting anyone. Form your own view first
- Ask: what would I decide if no one would ever know what I chose?
- Distinguish clearly between people whose expertise you need and people whose approval you want

What makes it worse: More consultation, more polling, more asking for permission

THE WORRIER

Strength: Foresight and risk awareness - the Worrier spots problems others miss

- Compare the risk of acting with the risk of not acting. Inaction has a cost too.
- Ask: what is the most probable outcome, not the worst possible one?
- Describe the specific fear: not “something will go wrong” but “I am afraid that X will happen”
- Write down what could go wrong once. Then treat that assessment as settled unless something new emerges.

What makes it worse: More worst-case scenario thinking, or reassurance that doesn't address the real fear

THE RUMINATOR

Strength: Depth and thoroughness - the Ruminator rarely misses nuance or overlooks consequences

- Set a specific stopping time for deliberation. When the clock runs out, you write down where you are and stop.
- Write the decision down, seal it, and return to it in 24 hours without thinking in between.
- Ask: am I thinking about this, or am I avoiding thinking about something else?

What makes it worse: More unstructured thinking time, journaling without a decision endpoint

THE OVERCONFIDENT

Strength: Decisiveness and clarity under pressure - the Overconfident rarely stalls, second-guesses, or loses momentum

- Build in a structured challenge before deciding. Ask one person you trust to argue against your preferred option, and listen properly.
- Ask: what would change my mind about this? If the answer is nothing, that is the warning sign.
- Run Steps 2-5 as a checklist before committing. If you have worked through them properly, the confidence is earned.

What makes it worse: Surrounding yourself with people who agree; treating the analysis as a formality once the answer feels obvious

THE IMPULSIVE

Strength: Action-orientation - the Impulsive keeps things moving and rarely suffers from analysis paralysis or loss of momentum

- Set a minimum thinking period before deciding. For significant decisions, commit to a short pause and at least one check before acting.
- Ask: am I deciding now because this is the right time, or because I am uncomfortable with not yet having decided?
- Write the decision down and return to it before acting. If it still feels right after sleeping on it, it probably is.

What makes it worse: Urgency (real or imagined); environments that reward speed and treat deliberation as weakness

THE FATALIST

Strength: Equanimity about uncertain outcomes - the Fatalist is not paralysed by what-ifs and can accept results without excessive self-blame

- Ask: if I had to choose, what would I choose? Then treat that answer as your decision. Equanimity about the outcome is healthy; abdicating the choice is not.
- Identify the specific thing you are responsible for. Not the uncontrollable consequences, just the choice itself.
- Distinguish between acceptance (what happens after deciding) and avoidance (what happens instead of deciding)
- Choose someone who will check that you have decided, and by when. Of all these strategies, this is the one that does not depend on you.

What makes it worse: Reinforcing the belief that outcomes are entirely outside your control; framing decisions as things that happen to you rather than things you make happen.

MY COMMITMENT

My main pattern is...

In my next decision, I will watch for...

Bring this to Step 1 of the Decision Cycle, where Drawing on Experience asks which of your patterns may show up.

OBSERVATIONS OVER TIME

Use this space to record specific moments where you caught a pattern in action. They only become visible over time.

Decision / situation	Pattern I noticed	What I did differently	Outcome

If a pattern causes significant distress or repeatedly affects important decisions, it may be worth speaking to a coach or therapist. A framework helps you work with a pattern, but it cannot replace the value of working with a person.

PART B Hesitation diagnostic

Hesitation is information. Before forcing yourself forward, identify what kind of stuck you are - because different types require different responses. Check all that apply.

STAGE 1 - IDENTIFY YOUR TYPE

☐ Type 1 - Fog (Think phase)

"I don't understand the situation clearly enough to move forward."

Signs: You're gathering information but it keeps raising more questions · The more you explore, the more uncertain you feel · You don't know what you don't know

Next: Re-enter at Step 2 (Explore the Evidence) - focus on the core questions you cannot answer

☐ Type 2 - Overload (Think phase)

"I have too much information or too many options - I can't choose."

Signs: You've been going in circles for weeks without resolution · You keep generating new options instead of evaluating existing ones · Everything looks equally viable - or equally flawed

Next: Re-enter at Step 4 (Weigh the Options) - use structured scoring to create real separation

☐ Type 3 - Fear (Check / Choose phase)

"I know what I should do, but I'm avoiding the decision."

Signs: You have enough information but keep seeking more · You're consulting others for validation, not insight · You're afraid of being wrong, or of what the decision will cost you

Next: Re-enter at Step 6 (Test Your Values) - identify what you're afraid of before proceeding

☐ Type 4 - Drift (Act phase)

"I've made the decision, but nothing is happening."

Signs: Days or weeks have passed with no concrete action taken · The decision feels less certain the longer you leave it · You feel vague guilt but not urgency

Next: Use the Decision-to-Action Planner - then enter at Step 8 (Do and Deliver)

☐ Type 5 - Doubt (Grow phase)

"I've acted, but I'm losing confidence that it's working."

Signs: You're second-guessing the decision based on new information · You're scanning for signs of failure rather than signs of progress · You're comparing your results to unrealistic timelines or others' outcomes

Next: Re-enter at Step 9 (Reflect and Learn) - review the evidence objectively before changing course

STAGE 2 - DIAGNOSE DEEPER

For each type you identified above, answer the three questions below. Honest answers here will clarify the real source of your hesitation and point you to the right re-entry point in the Decision Cycle.

Type 1 - Fog (Think phase)

What is the specific question I cannot answer right now?

What would I need to know or see in order to feel clear enough to move on?

Is this real uncertainty, or am I using complexity as a reason to delay?

Type 2 - Overload (Think phase)

If I had to choose by end of day, which option would I pick - and why?

What is stopping me from committing to that option right now?

Will gathering more information resolve this, or am I using it to avoid deciding?

Type 3 - Fear (Check / Choose phase)

What is the real consequence I'm trying to avoid? Describe it specifically.

What is the cost of not deciding - to me, and to others?

If the fear were removed, what would I decide?

Type 4 - Drift (Act phase)

What was the first action I said I would take - and why haven't I taken it?

What is specifically blocking the first step: time, resources, confidence, or something else?

What is the smallest possible action I could take in the next 24 hours?

Type 5 - Doubt (Grow phase)

What evidence do I have that this is not working - and how solid is that evidence?

Am I comparing my current position to a realistic benchmark, or an idealised one?

Is this a signal that I should change course, or a sign I need to persist longer?

IF THE OBSTACLE IS SELF-TRUST

Sometimes what is stopping you is not this decision. Running through the Avoider, the Pleaser and the Worrier is a common thread: a lack of confidence in your own judgement. The Avoider does not trust themselves to make the call and be accountable for it. The Pleaser cannot locate their own preference without checking it against other people's reactions. The Worrier does not trust their capacity to cope if something goes wrong.

Self-trust is not certainty. It does not mean knowing the answer in advance. It means believing you are capable of working through the decision carefully, acting on what you find, and managing the consequences if it goes wrong.

A degree of self-trust is a precondition for any decision. Without it the process stalls however good the framework is. That is why hesitation which returns decision after decision, in different circumstances and about different subjects, is worth treating as a question in its own right rather than as a feature of the decision in front of you.

- Is this hesitation about this decision, or has it appeared in the last several?
- 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 in order to decide this today?

If self-trust is the obstacle rather than the decision, Deciding Under Pressure, the guide for decisions that feel difficult, is built for that situation, and a conversation with someone you trust may do more than any tool.

MY COMMITMENT

My hesitation type is...

My immediate next step is...

Sources

The patterns are a synthesis based on well-established findings in psychology, as Chapter 12 of LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment explains, not a scientific classification. The Perfectionist, Worrier and Overconfident patterns draw on Simon and Schwartz on satisficing and maximising; the Avoider on Anderson; the Pleaser on Beck; the Ruminator on Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues; the Impulsive on Carleton and on Whiteside and Lynam; the Fatalist on Rotter and on Maier and Seligman. Part B draws on Schwartz, Kahneman, Duke, Beck and Hayes and colleagues.

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