

How Decision Making Affects Your Life Positively and Negatively

Making decisions is easy if there is only one option on the table. Try doing it when you have multiple choices and at least two that make sense. In that case, decision making is never easy. The jumble inside your mind is hard to sort out.

The mind freely associates without guidance from you. It's like having a computer with no keyboard. You get thoughts that all may be consistent and make sense. You may also have competing thoughts that sound equally reasonable and you are unable to tell which one is right and which one is wrong.

Competing thoughts are based on mixed emotions. If you think competing thoughts are hard to manage, competing emotions are even harder to figure out. You have feelings generated in the present moment and feelings getting dumped into the mind from memory of related past events. The size of the emotion can be confusing and feel too big.

Yet, there is a reason that you feel that way, but you cannot understand it in the moment. You can't tell whether you are making sense or losing your mind. The combined weight of past emotion and present emotion makes decision making terribly complicated.

You may ask yourself:

Is the size of my reaction a valid measure of the size of the problem?

When am I overreacting or underreacting?

How do you tell?

Do you ignore history, give it a little weight, or make a choice based on history alone?

Do I decide based on what I see in the moment or not?

When is an incident part of a pattern, or when does it stand-alone?

When you are forced to make a decision in life, do you use your head or your heart?

Do you use the facts or your intuition?

Do you choose the path that feels wrong but you know is right, or the path that feels right but you know is wrong?

How come right and wrong don't obviously line up against each other, but get mixed up between thoughts and feelings?

Importance of history and repeating patterns

Making good decisions requires knowledge of yourself and your history. The ability to discern past from present reactions is necessary to see through the fog in your mind. Your history is critical to the understanding of a problem and making a healthy decision. The past is the best predictor of future behavior, and your past is the key to understanding your reactions and how you make decisions.

A noted 19th-century philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, had some thoughts about this human dilemma. He wrote a small book called, "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" in 1874. That may seem like a long time ago, but his words are as meaningful today as they were back then.

The human condition has not changed. People have the same needs and function much the same way as they did 134 years ago. While you may have greater information available today thanks to technology, the basics of decision-making remain the same.

In that booklet, Nietzsche talked about the importance of history in people's lives and the impact on understanding yourself. He wrote; "the past and the present is one and the same...a static structure of unchanged value and eternally the same meaning".

My interpretation of what Nietzsche is saying is that the meaning of an event is understood through the lens of history. You recognize something because it reminds you of something. Otherwise, you would not know to recognize it. Your history defines what you make of things, not only the meaning of events but also the meaning of other people's actions.

So what is this philosopher trying to tell you about decision making?

I believe he is advocating that you are a product of your history. This history is embedded in your emotional reactions. They are strong because they are ingrained in your relationship to your family. You learn what behavior is acceptable from your parents, and that knowledge is cemented in place with strong emotions of fear, guilt and shame.

Those emotions come into play whenever you make decisions. Since you act to relieve emotional tension, the emotions from past events can dictate your decisions. Even as an adult, you are programmed to follow the rules you have been taught to avoid experiencing those emotions. Quite often, you even anticipate those reactions and make decisions to avoid triggering those emotional states.

As a result, whether you are aware of it or not, you learn certain ways of behaving within your family that are permanently imprinted in your mind. You continue to repeat these behaviors throughout your life through the decisions you make that are influenced by those emotions.

Being different than your parents

Most people use their interactions with their parents as a guide for their decisions in life. They either want to repeat what was good or do the complete opposite. A parent who had fond memories of youth sports wants their child to play sports. The child who was hit vows as an adult to never hit their children.

The problem in the case of being the same or different than your parents is that you are still using them as your guide. You either repeat their same mistake or go in the opposite direction.

This leaves you wide open to making a different kind of mistake, one that is equally unhealthy but in a different direction, 180 degrees opposite of your parents.

Using your parent's behavior can lead to bad decisions. No parent is perfect and some of the rules they taught you are equally imperfect. If you follow their lead and listen to the emotions that are based on your upbringing, you run the risk of repeating the same mistakes that your parents made.

A better way to make decisions is to use the definition of healthy behavior as your reference. Healthy behavior is based on psychological principles like balance or natural reason. It allows you to make a choice that can range from being somewhat like your parents to not like them at all. It enables you to be flexible and adjust the decision to fit the situation, rather than rigidly follow rules designed by your parents that no longer apply.

Your history is in your emotions

Some of your emotions bear the imprint of your parents. Anytime you act to reduce fear or avoid guilt and shame, your parent, in the form of the pressure created by your learned emotions, are still running your life. It is not obvious because they are not standing right next to you in that moment. In fact, they may have even passed away.

It doesn't make a difference. They exert their influence through the emotional reactions that are triggered in the present. These emotions determine how the body frames a given statement. The emotions create a tone, an attitude or a posture that can send a message that supports your words or sends a different message. They make communication complex and confusing.

You, fortunately, have a different set of emotions that do not bear the imprint of your parents. These emotions bear your own imprint. They are your natural reactions based on your natural reason. They occur spontaneously and can compete directly with your learned emotions.

These natural emotions represent the real you and are your key to changing the patterns you learned early in life from your parents. Your natural emotions are your salvation, your hope for a healthier life than the one that your parents gave you. Using these emotions as a guide helps you make better decisions, ones that reflect the real you.

I don't believe that parents are bad or intend to hurt their children. Parenting is the one thing you care about and don't get any training to teach you what to do. I too am a parent of four children and did not intentionally do harm to any one of them. I can only make the same assumption for all parents.

That does not mean that my wife and I did not make our fair share of mistakes in raising our children. A degree in psychology does not guarantee that you can act any healthier than anybody else. It does give you the training to define what is healthy, to share that with others and to guide a treatment process.

It does not protect you from making the same mistakes as everybody else. The emotions from your past are strong, hard to ignore and drive your decision making more than you realize. It simply means that you can't get it right as a parent. You can only get it less wrong by listening to them, acknowledging what is true about their reactions, and trying to be different in the present.

Negative decision making

Parenting is one arena where repeating patterns can cause you to make bad decisions. If you are ruled by the negative emotions, you will make either the same mistakes as your parents or mistakes equal in magnitude but in the opposite direction. Until you learn about your own emotions, you operate as a slave to your past, run by emotions that you don't see, and repeat the same or different mistakes as your parents.

Decisions made to relieve the learned emotions cause negative decision making and have many negative consequences. Here are a few to consider:

Fear-based decisions

Decisions based on fear of the consequences will rarely be good decisions. They will be made in haste and full of assumptions that say as much about your history as they do about the present situation. Fear makes you rush to judgment and increases the chance that you make the wrong decision for the wrong reason.

Excessive people-pleasing: Sensitivity to criticism

Learned emotions lock you into role-based behavior that is designed to please others and not yourself. If you organize your decision-making along those lines, you will be looking for approval from others for your decision. As a result, you will be disappointed if they do not accept your decision, and over-react to any perceived criticism.

Perfectionism

Trying too hard to get it right for others can turn you into a perfectionist. You will live in fear that your mistakes will be found and pointed out. You can easily become obsessed and driven to a level of perfection that is unattainable. Worse, you may not realize that you are trying to please others to excess, and become extremely hard on yourself.

Anxiety due to ambiguity or novelty

When your decisions are driven by learned emotions, the tendency is to expect yourself to know something before you get a chance to learn it. If you encounter situations where the decision is not obvious, or you are facing it for the first time, there is no history to guide your decision. You are forced to make educated guesses and run a high risk of making a mistake. Ambiguous or new situations evoke high anxiety because you are forced to learn by trial and error, the exact opposite of what a perfectionist needs.

Second-guessing

When you are hard on yourself or driven by perfectionism, you can easily learn to doubt yourself. It will become easy to second-guess any decision you make. You will tend to give more weight to the bad and downplay the good. The more you doubt your decision, the more the fears will grow. This leads to paralysis by analysis, where you are unable to make a decision because the level of fear shuts down the mind.

Positive decision making

The exact opposite occurs when you use your natural reactions and natural reason to make decisions. Here's the benefit of using natural emotions:

Recovery from mistakes

Natural reason is flexible. You decide based on what feels right and what feels wrong. You recognize that decisions are based on circumstances, and if the circumstances change, you are entitled to change your mind. With this framework, you are in a better position to critically evaluate a decision and recover before it is too late to go in a different direction.

Trial and error learning

Trial and error learning is the best form of learning. It is rare in life that you make the exact right decision. Usually, there is no right or wrong, only different. Most decisions amount to successive approximations. You try to make an educated guess and adjust the decision based on feedback. This process takes much of the pressure off of decision-making, as you don't need to get it right the first time. You can adapt and change as the situation evolves.

Self-knowledge

Good decisions are based on the assumption that a person knows their emotional worlds, can recognize their emotions and can separate them into natural and learned emotions. The more this emotional awareness grows, the easier it will become to identify your emotions and decide which set to follow and which set to ignore.

Balance in relationships

Like good decisions, good relationships depend on telling the difference between the two sets of emotions, the learned and the natural. Learned emotions create rigid and defensive reactions, ones that cause damage to a relationship. Natural emotions promote balance in relationships, as there is emotional space to explore different options, negotiate, and create a compromise that works for both parties.

Managing the power of roles

Roles are the basis for power in relationships. Parents are responsible for children's welfare, so they have the power to tell children what to do. A boss has power over a worker because the worker is dependent on the boss's approval to keep their job and salary. Decision-making in relationships where there are differences in power is even harder than normal. Power can cause fear, and make people resort to learned emotions to find comfort. Doing what you are told is easy to justify if the authority figure holds more power over you.

Summary

Good decision making is essential to succeed in life and relationships. You use emotion to make decisions. There are two sets of emotions that must be discriminated. One set, the learned emotions, are the basis for bad decisions. The other set, the natural emotions, enable good decisions to be made. Telling the difference between them becomes essential to making healthy decisions.