

Making a good decision for me!

Secret to making a good decision for me is:

“Notice and acknowledge my emotions...

...and not let them rule my decision.”

1. What is a good decision for me?

How do I know?

We began to use emotions to guide our decision-making when our evolving brain at around the age of two invoked our 'limbic system'. This stage, caused by a change in our hormones, is often referred to as the 'terrible twos'. As we grew, we learnt to refine our decision-making based on our emotional-centred 'limbic system'.

Is that a good way to make decision for me?

Unless we learnt to make decisions in a different way, it was the only way we had in our early years. And for many, it remains the only way of making decisions in adult life.

Is there another way to make decisions?

Yes, there is. Around the ages of 6 to 8, hormones invoke another part of our brain called the 'cortex'. This part of the brain has the capability to use reason to make decisions - the analysis of logic and meaning.

How do we learn to use this new 'logical' way of making decisions?

We mostly learn in our early years by copying our role-models, usually our parents and teachers. If they use reasoning for their decision making, then we stand a good chance of learning it too.

If our role-models don't, then we will continue to affirm and refine our emotionally-centred decision-making as the best way to make decisions. Nonetheless, learning the rational 'logical' way of making decisions is available to us, if we take the time to pursue it.

Importantly, there is a benefit from using both our emotional and logical brains together. Today, this is referred to as 'using our Emotional Intelligence'.

What is 'Emotional Intelligence'?

Research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is a big factor in achieving happiness and success in life. It has a big part to play in decision making. As a result, it can help build stronger relationships and more successful careers.

What does it mean to have emotional intelligence?

It starts by recognising and controlling our impulsive emotions, and in particular, how they control our important decisions. When using our emotional intelligence we will also pay attention to others' emotional states from the cues they give us. Understanding our emotional response alongside others' emotional states will enable us to relate better and make more effective and appropriate decisions.

How do I use emotional intelligence to make good decisions for me?

When my mind is overtaken by emotion, my 'emotional intelligence' is disabled. As a result, my ability to think rationally is seriously impeded.

You could say my emotion over-powered my ability to reason, but that is not all it does. My emotion also wants to prove itself to be 'right' - a very powerful argument for keeping my emotional decision-making in charge.

But this is where it can let us down.

First, our emotion doesn't need an exact match of circumstances to be re-stimulated, it only needs a slight resemblance to the original cause of our decision.

That's its first mistake.

No two circumstances we ever experience are the same. There will always be differences, but our emotional decision making just doesn't have the time to consider them - our survival or being proved right is its biggest concern.

Its second mistake...

The emotion we chose at the time of the original experience, may have been wrong in the first place. We may have been misjudged, misguided or misinformed and our chosen emotion at the time was a wrong response.

Unless we challenge our early emotional response, our survival strategy will continue to insist that it is 'right'. Even though it was based on different circumstances or a mistaken emotional response.

In summary, making decisions based on our emotional response to an event is predictable and uncompromising. It does not guarantee a successful outcome, unless its only purpose is to prove itself right again.

As a result, we are blinded to any other possible outcomes which may benefit us more. And, we mistakenly perpetuate our misguided belief that our emotions are always right.

2. How do we learn to make a good decisions?

We have already spent most of our lives making decisions the way we learnt in our early years, and much of our internal processes are overlaid by layers of new experiences.

So where do we start?

We start by taking time to reflect on how we make decisions. At this stage it is helpful to have an ally, someone we feel safe with. Their role is to listen and reflect back what they see and hear as we talk through our experiences.

How does our safe ally do that?

They start by listening without making judgement or giving advice. Then, they feedback what they heard and the emotions they observed, for example:

"I can see you get very angry and blame the other person when you feel unfairly treated."

Next they check you out by asking, "is that correct?" You will either agree or say they are wrong. If it is the latter, then you must correct what they said.

Now, you have started to think about your experience and talk about your emotional response, rather than just re-playing it. This is the beginning of recovering your 'emotional intelligence'.

The main purpose of your survival strategy is to protect you from ever re-experiencing the original emotion. Nevertheless, by re-experiencing the

original emotion with a safe ally there is a benefit. It teaches you that you can survive the emotion, which has two consequences: first it lessens its power over you and second you are now freer to re-evaluate its relevance.

With your new insights, you can consider strategies for handling your emotional response next time with questions like:

“What might I do differently next time I feel unfairly treated?”

“How will that help me?”

“What about the person that treated me unfairly?”

“What might they have been feeling at the time?”

It will be challenging at first because you have come to rely on your emotional decision making strategies for most of your life.

Working it out for yourself

Because you have emotional intelligence - the combined working of your emotional brain and reasoning brain - you have the facility to work it out for yourself. You just need to set up the right environment with a safe ally and go for it.

In summary, work with an ally who can reflect back what they see and hear. You now have the chance to become the observer of yourself and not the subjective insider who can only see out. Review your emotional decision making strategies by thinking of new ways to manage your emotional responses.

When you take control of your emotions and logical thinking, then you are using your ‘emotional intelligence’*it is the only way to make good decisions for yourself.*

3. What can stop me making a good decision for me?

Mostly, it is our total belief in our emotional response being the most effective and appropriate response to an event. This is supported by the certainty that our limbic system (our emotional brain) has a faster reaction time than our cortex (our thinking brain) in any perceived threatening situation. Therein lies another mistake.

What is the mistake this time?

We view all current events as threatening to us as the original event. And on that basis, if we are to survive (or to be proved right) we must respond in the same way as the original response. This is our mistake. We are using the wrong brain to assess the current event.

What do I mean by using the wrong brain?

We grew up using our emotional brain as our decision making tool and because it worked for us, we stopped there. Even though we had the facility to make decisions based on reason and understanding, we didn't make the transition. As long as we were successful why did we need to change?

How do you measure your success?

In my experience, we measure our success by proving ourselves right and the others wrong, by proving we are not to blame and they are, and making ourselves feel better by making them feel bad.

How did we learn to measure success like that?

It's obvious, it happened to us! We were treated in these ways by someone who we trusted and unbeknown to us was as insecure as we are today!!!

Is it our success that we are really measuring?

In a way it is. If we can prove ourselves successful in any relationship situation then we can feel 'OK' about ourselves. And this is the fundamental goal of our survival strategy: to feel 'OK' about ourselves, or put another way: to avoid feeling 'Not OK' about ourselves.

What drives this need to feel 'OK' about ourselves?

I assume my parents dearly wanted me to feel 'OK' about myself; and yet it did not occur to them that their critical and punitive judgements would lead to me perceiving myself as 'NOT OK'.

The concept of feeling 'OK or 'Not OK' comes from a book by Thomas A. Harris, called, "I'm OK, You're OK". The basic premise is that we build our self-perception based on the appraisal and disapproval of people close to us, such as parents, family and friends.

Linking back to the question “what stops me making a good decision for myself”. You can appreciate that an early decision pertaining to my self-perception, such as ‘OK’ or ‘Not OK’, would impact highly on whether I make a good decision for me or not.

What is to be done about this?

It starts by recognising that deep down all our emotional responses are only strategies to satisfy our need to prove ourselves right on the one hand and counter our self-perceived feelings of ‘NOT OK’ on the other.

4. What can help me make a good decision for myself?

If you accept ‘making a good decision for yourself’ requires you to stand back and take a good look at your current emotionally-driven decision-making strategies then you are in with a chance. But, if you are not up for changing your current emotional responses, then I can’t help you.

To change, you must be willing to contemplate change. Otherwise it is a waste of your and my time. So if you continue to read from this point on, I will assume you are willing to contemplate change.

Where do we start?

Self-reflection

Let me illustrate this idea with a comparison of two ways we self-reflect. In the example below I am asking you to self-reflect on your physical looks.

- The first is what do you see when you look at yourself in the mirror?
- The second is what do you see when someone takes a photograph of you?

My guess is in the mirror reflection you would only see what you want to see, and usually in a positive light.

Why is that?

How we see ourselves is usually filtered by our own pre-conception of how we look. So when you look in the mirror we filter out the bits we don’t want to see.

On the other hand, the photograph taken at the same time and in the same light, how does that get received? Well, you know as well as I do that very few of us like what we look like in a photograph.

Why is that?

We are looking at our image in a detached way and without filtering out the bits we don't want to see. We are seeing ourselves as we really look and not liking it.

These ways of self-reflection not only apply to our physical attributes but also the attributes of our personality - what we believe ourselves to be. When we self-reflect on who we are or what we believe, we will do the same. We will filter out the bits we don't want to hear about or see - only this time we are looking in the mirror at our personality.

Whereas, when someone gives us feedback it is like the photograph, we get to hear and see the bits of our personality that we don't want to hear about or have on public view.

So in a way, we are our own worst enemy when it comes to self-reflection. And, when it come to feedback, even though it may be the truth of who we are, do we want to hear it from someone else? If we feel safe enough with them then we might!

5. What helps me feel safe enough to talk about myself?

This is probably at the heart of our challenge. If only we knew how to feel safe enough to disclose anything and everything about ourselves.

It starts in our early childhood when we learnt there are somethings we should never say to our parents or teacher for fear of criticism or punishment. It is not a difficult to understand.

No-one wants to feel bad about themselves, I know I don't. But we all have had experiences as young people growing up where the people we trusted the most made us feel bad, guilty or even ashamed of ourselves. Once these experiences are burnt into our minds, they demand we keep them hidden from the world, and overtime they also become hidden to ourselves.

Nonetheless, the smoke screens or facades we created to keep our secrets hidden remain viewable to the outside world.

The most helpful questions to ask ourselves are those that help us reveal our hidden experiences. Once we are disclosing, we will begin to experience the benefit of being open and vulnerable. For me, it is a feeling of authenticity and, believe it or not, safety because I no longer have to pretend or cover up.

Below is a list of question that I could ask myself:

- What am I hiding from others?
- What am I hiding from myself?
- What I am protecting myself from?
- What was the reason for creating a smoke screen or facade?
- Why do I still feel the need for a smoke screen or facade?

You may find you cannot answer the questions above or you may not want to. Either way, they are the key to unlocking the past experiences that have both distorted your self-perception and inhibit your good decision-making today.

5. So, what is a good decision for me?

Back to the question we started with, except now we have some tools to help us, starting with our emotional intelligence.

Use my Emotional Intelligence

Because you have emotional intelligence - the combined working of your emotional brain and thinking brain - you have the facility to work it out for yourself. You just need to set up the right environment with a safe ally and go for it.

Understand the limits of my limbic system

It is helpful to realise that we have available to us two ways of making decisions - with our emotions (limbic system) or with our reasoning (cortex). If we predominantly use our emotions then we limit our flexibility to make appropriate and therefore more successful decisions.

Do not hide behind my smoke screens or facades

It is helpful to reveal our hidden experiences which we hide behind a smoke screen or facade. Once put out in front of us, we will begin to experience the benefit of being open and honest. For me, it is a feeling of authenticity and, believe it or not, safety because I no longer have to pretend or cover up.

Acknowledge my emotions but don't let them rule me

Finally, the secret to 'making a good decision for me' is to notice and acknowledge my emotions and not let them rule over my decision-making.

Leave our emotion in the past where it belongs

Even after we have disclosed to a safe ally, we may still feel a twinge of the original emotion in certain circumstances. By acknowledging it is an emotion from our past and that it may not be relevant in today's circumstances, we have taken back control and not allowed it to rule our decisions today.

Remember the secret to good decision making is:

"Notice and acknowledge my emotions...

...and not let them rule my decision."