

Decision Making

Every day of our life we need to make decisions. From the moment we get out of bed to the moment we go to sleep, we make countless decisions, both consciously and unconsciously. If you believe in **Free Will**, then you will believe that you are free to make those decisions. You will be aware that there are many factors influencing you, but that in the end, you decide for yourself what you will do.

What is a Decision?

A **decision** is a mental assent to a course of action. When we make decisions, we affirm within our mind that we will act in a certain way. It is stronger than an intention. I may first have an intention to write this article. When I decide to do it, I have given that intention priority over competing intentions. I have resolved any ambiguities or uncertainties. My mind is more certain. Once I have made the decision, I begin to formulate a plan of when, where and how I will carry out my decision.

Types of Decisions

There are many types of decisions. Two major distinctions are those with **short-term** consequences, and those with **long term**. Whether I put milk in my coffee or have it black reaps an immediate consequence in the taste of the coffee. Whether I study regularly during a 4-year course will contribute to the long-term consequence of whether or not I pass my exam. How I eat each day will have both immediate (how full I am) and long-term consequences (whether I lose or gain weight).

How do we make Decisions?

There are routine, non-controversial decisions we make often and regularly. When I decide to walk to town instead of driving, I do so almost automatically, as it is what I do most of the time. When it rains heavily or I have heavy parcels to carry, I will decide to take the car. I give the matter a small amount of thought, briefly calculating the pros and cons. In the case of the rain, I weigh up missing out on exercise against getting wet. In the case of the heavy parcels, the contest is clearer. If the parcels are too heavy for me to carry, the car is the only option and the decision is less controversial.

When it comes to important decisions, decision-making is more problematic, especially when the outcomes are less clear. We do not, and often cannot have all the information we need. We have to rationally appraise our options as best we can. When we do this, we know that we are taking a chance when calculating the odds. Even so, rationally weighing up what we do know is our best bet.

Weighing up the pros and cons can get very complicated but a simple formula will give you a start. First, make a note of all the options you can think of. Importantly, include the option of not doing anything. From talking to clients, I've found that this is one they often miss. From your list, eliminate the least effective options. For the rest, gather as much information as you can about each one. Then, list separately all the favourable and unfavourable factors of each option. Discard the options with the least favourable likely outcomes. Try to end up with a short list of the 2 or 3 most favourable options.

The next step is the trickiest. Give a weight to each most likely consequence, positive and negative, what they mean to you, personally, not what you think it should be. Otherwise, you will end up doing something you really don't want to do, and the exercise would have been pointless. The next step is to select the option that, on balance, gives you the most (predictably) positive outcome.

Finally, check your gut feeling. Our feelings can guide us as well as our rationality. Feelings on their own, however, are not usually enough. Knowing as much as you can about the likely outcomes give you a better chance of being prepared. Finally, consider how you will cope if the worst-case scenario occurs. Have plan B ready in case you need it.