

TWU Counseling Center

Guide to Decision-Making

As a student, you must make hundreds of decisions, ranging from what classes to take and what topic to address in an assigned paper, to what career you will pursue and who you will involve in a relationship.

Following these steps may ease the stress of the decision-making process.

1. Take A Deep Breath and Relax.

We exercise clearer judgment and make better decisions when we are calm and relaxed.

2. Do Not Make A Decision When You Are Feeling Distressed Or Anxious.

When we experience a great deal of stress, we cannot think clearly and are less able to make reasoned choices. If possible, put off making major decisions until you are free enough from distress to think clearly and rationally and have enough information to make a reasoned choice.

3. Know When The Decision Needs To Be Made.

Ask yourself, "Must this decision be made now?" Often, the answer is "no". It is important to give yourself enough time to relax, think clearly, and consider all available alternatives. This process take time. If you have three weeks before the deadline for registering, you do not need to make a hasty decision regarding course selection today. Give yourself the time you need. Use the time limit for when a decision must be made as a guide for gathering information and considering alternatives.

4. Identify What Information Is Needed For A Reasoned Decision.

Ask yourself, "What do I need to know in order to make a good decision about this area?" If you are making a decision about career selection, useful information will include facts about the kinds of work entailed, requirements for entry into the field, salary potential, job availability and location, and opportunities for leisure activities. Often, once this information is available, choices become much more clear.

5. Identify Potential Sources Of Needed Information.

Brainstorm about where you might find the information you need. Be creative. Consider resources such as a career guidance center within your university. Consider individuals who work in the fields of interest who might be available for an interview. Other resources to consider include local and national newspapers, magazines geared to college students, and books on the areas of interest.

6. Gather The Information That You Need In Order To Make A Reasoned Decision.

From your list of information sources, follow through with the leg work. Ask, look, interview, consult, read. Remember that the more information that you acquire, the easier and more grounded your decision will be.

7. Talk To Others About Your Pending Decision, But Recognize That The Choice Is Yours Alone.

Others may have information, thoughts, and ideas that you may not have known about or considered. Talking with others may help you to gain information and clarify your own values. It is important to remember, however, that you alone must make and live with your decisions. The opinions of others are simply opinions that have no greater weight than your own. It's also important to remember that the opinions of people you respect and admire should carry much more weight than the opinions of any others.

8. Write Down The Information That You Gather.

Don't rely on your memory to store the information that you learn. Write down what you learn so that you will have a record that you can easily and quickly refer to. Be sure to include the source of the information, in case you need to follow up with questions later.

9. List Your Options And Alternatives.

Once you have gathered information regarding the areas of choice, make a list of available alternatives. Often, we discover options that we hadn't previously considered as we gather information.

10. List The Pros And Cons of Each Available Option.

Write down the potential benefits and detriments of each of your options, based on the information that you have gathered. Your anxiety will be eased if you simply write these down without evaluating them at first. This will allow you

to be more objective. Set your list down and come back to it a few days later to see if you have thought of additional consequences that can be added to the list.

11. Clarify Your Values, Goals, Interests, Needs, And Desires About The Area Of Interest.

When confronted with a major decision, it is helpful to be clear about what is important to you and what you want. Distinguish between those aspects that are essential and those that are merely preferred. For example, it may be essential for you that a job allow you to be creative. You may prefer, but not require, that a job involve flexibility and leisure time. You will probably be able to quickly and readily identify some of these areas. Others will likely require some thought and contemplation. Take the time you need to determine what issues are important to you. It may be helpful to write these down and add to your list as you gain clarity.

12. Weigh The Pros And Cons Of Each Available Alternative.

Once you have in hand adequate information about the area of interest and are clear about your own needs, values, and desires, you can use these factors to weigh the potential benefits and detriments of each of your options. Keep in mind that some values will carry more weight than others. The factors identified as “essential” will be more important in selecting an option than those factors identified as “preferable but not critical”.

13. Recognize That There Is Seldom (If Ever) A Single “Right” Answer.

One aspect of maturity is learning that we do not live in a black-and-white world where choices are clearly and completely “good” or “bad”. The dilemma for most choices is that there are both good and bad potential consequences of each available alternative. When we engage in black-and-white thinking, we place pressure on ourselves that reduces our ability to make reasoned decisions.

14. Select Your Choice.

Armed with the information that you have acquired about the area of interest and yourself, you are now prepared to make your decision. Evaluate the options available and how their various aspects fit with your own needs and values. Then choose. Often, the information that you have gathered rules out some options and clarifies the potential impact of other alternatives.

15. Once You Have Made Your Decision, Relax And Forget About It.

Once a decision has been made, there is no point in obsessing about it and second-guessing yourself. If you did your homework and rigorously followed the steps for making reasoned choices, then you can be confident that you have made the decision that is best for you at the moment. Remember that there is no single “right” choice. The other alternatives had potentially negative aspects, just as does the one that you have selected. Re-hashing a decision, especially if there is little or no option of changing it, will serve no purpose beyond driving yourself crazy!

16. Give Yourself Permission To Make Mistakes.

Even when we follow all the procedures for reasoned decision-making, there is no guarantee that our choice will work out. If we decide later that we would be more satisfied with another course of action, it is not the end of the world. The goal of decision-making is not to make THE right decision, but to make the decision that appears best on the basis of available information.

17. If A Course Of Action Does Not Work Out, Learn From The Process.

Once we make a decision and pursue a course of action, we may learn additional information about ourselves or the area of interest. We may experience the courses that we must take to pursue our career choice as tedious and boring, in contrast to courses in another area. Perhaps a different choice would be better for us. Do not view changing your mind as a sign of weakness or failure. Replace thoughts that you “should have” selected a different course of action with “It would have been nice if” you had made a different choice. Be grateful for all the information that you have learned about yourself through your previous choice. Use this new information to evaluate your options and, once again, select the alternative that is best for you, based on the information that is available.

18. Practice Making Decisions.

Many of us have limited experience in making decisions. Any unfamiliar task feels awkward and difficult at first. But, just as riding a bicycle becomes easier with practice, so will practicing making decisions improve our skill. Make decisions about little things, such as where to eat out, what movie to watch, and which outfit to buy. If you don’t have preference, make one up! Go through the steps of decision-making, and learn from the choices that you later find to be less than optimal.

Sheryle Gordon Beatty, M.A.

**TWU
Counseling
Center Locations:**

Denton
West Jones Hall
940-898-3801

Dallas-Parkland
FPH 120
214-689-6655

Dallas-Presbyterian
DPB 16
214-706-2416

Houston
Suite 2250
713-794-2059