

How To Cope With A Difficult Dilemma – by Russ Harris

At times we will all get caught up in difficult dilemmas: ‘Do I stay in this job/relationship/house/neighbourhood /marriage/country/career – or not?’, ‘Do I have this operation/ sign this contract/ have children – or not?’, ‘Do I do what *they* want me to do, or do I do what *I* want to do?’ This tip sheet is to help you cope with such stressful situations.

Step 1: Acknowledge There Is Probably No Quick Fix

If you’ve been grappling with a major dilemma it’s highly unlikely that you’ll reach a final decision today. It could possibly happen, but it’s not likely. For example, many people consider leaving their marriages or their careers for several years before they finally do it.

Step 2: Analyze the Costs and Benefits

Sometimes we can resolve a dilemma with a classic cost-benefit analysis: write a list of all the costs and benefits for each option. If you’ve already done this and it hasn’t helped, fair enough—at least you’ve tried. But if you haven’t yet done this, or you’ve done it only halfheartedly, or you’ve done it in your head but not on paper, then definitely give it a try. Mindfully write down all of the costs and benefits of each option, on paper or on a computer. Note: this is a very different experience than thinking it through mentally or talking it through with a friend – and sometimes it is enough to help finalize the decision. However, the inconvenient truth is that the greater the dilemma, the less likely this method is to be helpful. Why? Because if one option was obviously better than the other, there wouldn’t be a dilemma in the first place!

Step 3: Recognize That There Is No Perfect Solution

There’s no perfect solution to this dilemma. If there were, you wouldn’t have a dilemma in the first place. So whichever choice you make, you’re likely to feel anxious about it and your mind’s going to say, *That’s the wrong decision* and point out all the reasons why you shouldn’t do it. If you’re waiting until the day there are no feelings of anxiety and no thoughts about making the wrong decision, you’ll be waiting forever. Anxiety and self-doubt are guaranteed, whichever option you choose.

Step 4: There’s No Way Not to Choose

Whatever your dilemma, you’re *already* making a choice. There’s actually no way *not* to choose. Each day that you don’t quit your job, you’re choosing to stay. Until the day you hand in your resignation, you’re staying there. Until the day you start that course, you’re choosing not to take it. Until the day you stop using contraceptives, you’re choosing not to have children. Each day that you don’t leave your partner, you’re choosing to stay. Until the day you pack your bags and move out of the house, you’re staying. Each day that you don’t sign the consent form for the operation, you’re choosing not to have surgery. And in the career-versus-family dilemma, you’re already choosing how many hours you spend at work and how many with your family.

Step 5: Acknowledge Today’s Choice

Given you’re already making a choice, start off your day by consciously acknowledging it. For example, when you wake up in the morning, you could say to yourself, “Okay, for the next twenty-four hours, I choose to stay in this relationship.” Or “For the next twenty-four hours, I choose to keep using contraceptives.” Or “For the next seven days, I choose to remain in my job.” Or “For the next week, I choose to spend X hours at work and Y hours with my family.”

Step 6: Take a Stand

Take a stand based on your values. You’re already making a choice, so you can enhance your sense of vitality and well-being by acting on that choice, guided by your values. Ask yourself: ‘What do I want to stand for in the next twenty-four hours?’ ‘What values do I want to live by in this area of life?’

If you’re staying in your relationship for one more day, ask yourself, ‘What sort of partner do I want to be for this one day?’ If you’re staying in your job for another day, what sort of employee do you want to be for that one day?

If you choose for one more day not to have the operation, then how do you want to spend those twenty-four hours? In the family-versus-career dilemma, you might ask yourself, ‘During the hours I spend with my family, what sort of parent do I want to be? And during the hours I spend at work, what sort of worker do I want to be?’

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Step 7: Make Time to Reflect

Put aside time on a regular basis to mindfully reflect on the situation. The best way to do this is as in step 2: use a diary or a computer to write down the costs and benefits of each option and see if anything has changed since last time you did this. You could also try to imagine what life might be like—both the positives and the negatives—of going down each potential path. For example, in the family-versus-career dilemma, one path might be spending thirty hours with the family and fifty hours at work per week, and another path might be spending forty hours with the family and forty hours at work per week.

For most people, a reflection time of ten to fifteen minutes three or four times a week suffices, but you can do as little or as much as you like. The key thing is that the time be spent in *mindful* reflection. Don't try to do it while also watching TV, doing housework, driving, going to the gym, cooking dinner, and so on. The aim is to just sit quietly with your pen and paper, or a computer, and do nothing but write down and reflect on the pros and cons of each choice for as long as you think is useful. Most people find ten to fifteen minutes three or four times a week is more than enough.

Step 8: Name the Story

Throughout the day, unhook yourself from unhelpful thoughts that can easily pull you into worrying, ruminating, or 'analysis paralysis.' An effective way to do this is by 'naming the story'. *Therapist:* Throughout the day, your mind will try to hook you back into the dilemma, to get you going over it again and again. That's only natural. But if that were truly helpful, you'd have resolved this by now. (After all, how many hours have you already spent thinking about this?!) So whenever your mind tries to hook you, try saying to yourself, "Aha! Here it is again. The 'stay or leave' story. Thanks, Mind." Then push your feet into the floor, get present, and focus your attention on doing something meaningful. You might also find it helpful to remind yourself, "I'll think about this later, mindfully, in my reflection time." (Note: when naming the story, come up with your own individualised name for it: e.g. the 'different job' story or the 'work versus family' story or the 'have a child' story – or simply the 'dilemma' story.)

Step 9: Practice Expansion

Feelings of anxiety will almost certainly arise—again and again and again—no matter which option you choose. So practice "expansion" when they do so. Breathe into those feelings; open up and make room for them; acknowledge to yourself, "Here's anxiety"; and remind yourself, "This feeling is normal. It's what everybody feels in a challenging situation with an uncertain outcome."

Step 10: Have Self-Compassion

Last but not least, we develop self-compassion. Talk to yourself gently and kindly, and unhook yourself from unhelpful, self-judgmental mind chatter using whatever defusion techniques work best for you. Remind yourself that you're a fallible human being, not some high-tech computer that can coldly analyze the probabilities and spit out the "perfect" answer. And remind yourself, this is a very difficult decision; if it were easy, you wouldn't have a dilemma in the first place.

Three Possible Outcomes for Your Dilemma

There are 3 possible outcomes:

1. In some cases, over time, one option will start to look obviously better than the other; this will then make your decision easier.
2. In some cases, over time, one option will no longer be available. This means, the decision is made for you.
3. In some cases, over time, the dilemma will continue, without any resolution. In these cases keep cycling through the steps above. Practice lots of self-compassion, and mindfully live by your values in the face of this ongoing stress.