



Making the TOUGH CHOICES

By challenging ourselves, we bring out our best

BY LEONARD CARR



THERE ARE NO INTRINSICALLY HARD CHOICES OR decisions in life. What makes them hard is that every choice carries within it certain meaning for the decision maker. The meaning has implications for the emotional, relational, or ethical aspects of the person's life. But, how do we make the tough choices in life? There are ways that you can challenge yourself, which will put you into a frame of mind that will allow you to effectively take on tough choices.

The most common defence against making difficult choices is confusion. People usually speak of confusion as an emotion that overcomes their will and subverts their power of choice. Confusion is a defence against the discomfort of taking a position. It's often easier to stay confused, constantly searching and questioning, than to take a decision and

actually commit to a course of action. Another avoidance strategy is numbness or procrastination. Overcomplicating the issue is a way of spawning confusion in a way that appears like you're working hard on making the decision, while actually running away from it. A variation of this is seeking lots of advice from equally competent, well-informed people, who will inevitably have different takes on the issues and approaches to the solution. These strategies represent a vain attempt to legitimise avoiding the responsibility of making a choice. Worry is similar. It's the unproductive recycling of thoughts, through which we wind up feeling paralysed; rather than real thinking which is logical, productive, and leads to a definite outcome. A good term for worry is rumination which is the technical term for chewing the cud. It is important to acknowledge that confusion and worry are themselves choices. All these strategies represent the choice to avoid making a choice.

The first question that you need to

“THROUGH THIS EXERCISE, YOU MAKE THE UNAVOIDABLE TRADE-OFFS EXPLICIT, AND IN SO DOING RESTORE YOUR SENSE OF CONTROL OVER YOUR LIFE.”

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“WHEN YOU ARE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR VALUES AND WHAT IS TRULY IMPORTANT TO YOU IN LIFE, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO PRESENT YOUR DECISION TO OTHERS IN AN OBJECTIVE WAY.”

challenge yourself to answer is: why in the first place you are finding the decision so challenging? Pay attention to what aspects of your personality or your relationships are being challenged by the current dilemma. For example, are you someone who prefers comfort and resists any change? Or, are you someone who likes to have multiple options open and committing to one makes you feel trapped without exit options and escape routes? Are you someone who has difficulty trusting life and therefore fears the future even when it promises to be a better one? Are you feeling pushed to move out of a comfort zone that has felt safe and reliable? Are you someone who needs to feel in charge and this decision is being driven by someone else, making you feel dominated? Are you so busy trying to keep everyone else happy that you don't know how to take yourself into consideration? Were you perhaps hoping for a more exotic or intriguing outcome? Maybe you are addicted to being liked or popular and this choice will inevitably upset people or affect your image or social status? Do you feel a sense of injustice at being in this situation and 'not deciding' is your form of protest? Are you someone who wants it all and is just unwilling to relinquish the benefits of any of the options? Oftentimes, people wait to get sufficiently frustrated or angry with the current situation or for someone else to trigger a change in order to be compelled to act, rather than taking conscious control to disrupt a mediocre or destructive status quo. You might be avoiding owning your power and authority because you do not feel entitled to ask for better or more in life. You may avoid decisions because you fear the consequences of fully owning your true power and talent. Owning your power and talent brings responsibilities and accountability that may be more convenient and comfortable for you to avoid.

There might be implicit relationship dynamics that make it hard for you to make a decision. For example, you may have outgrown something that used to be a basis of connection. You may fear hurting or disappointing someone. It could also be that someone you resent or envy has an

investment in the outcome and you do not want to give them the satisfaction of you doing what they wanted or of feeling controlled, or as if you have conceded on a point of pride. Oftentimes, people avoid decision making out of an unconscious loyalty. This loyalty could be about avoiding choosing a course of action that in the past upset someone important to you. In such a case you could always ask yourself whether, if that person knew all the current circumstances, he would hold the same view. There is also a more toxic form of loyalty that holds people back. There is loyalty to an authority figure who told you that you could not, would not, or did not deserve to succeed. A variation of this could be not wishing to outshine or get further in life than a parent who was never successful for fear of losing that parent's love or diminishing the parent's status in your own eyes. Avoiding change could also be a way to avoid letting go of some unfinished business from the past – finally saying goodbye to part of your history. It is important to realise that life begins at the end of your comfort zone

As you explore these and other psychological issues that operate like sub-plots of the bigger issue that you are trying to navigate through, you will come to understand the emotional layers that distort your perception of reality and play a role in shaping how you navigate through your life choices and dilemmas. The more of these issues you can resolve as part of the decision-making process, the more clarity you can bring to bear on your decisions, and the more at peace you can be with your choices.

The way out of confusion is to get serious about fully owning your power to shape your reality and the course of your life. Make sure you are not confusing the emotional with the objective elements of the issue at hand. Tease out for yourself what aspects of the issues have to do with feelings and relationships and which are about objective values, principles, and facts.

You may start taking responsibly by rigorously detailing your options and the implications and meanings of each one. You will probably soon come to realise that all of your options involve loss or sacrifice or other potentially destructive consequences for you and possibly others as well. You will have to face the fact that there will be no pain-free option. Analyse the risks of keeping the status quo compared with the risks of trying this new option. It's valuable to start by writing down the benefits of the status quo and the cost of changing and vice versa. You may find that the benefits of keeping the status quo are in fact costs, and that the costs of changing are in fact benefits. The most important step is to distil the implicit values that are being challenged by this dilemma and then to rank those values in order of their relative importance to you. For example, a decision to earn more might mean giving up living close to family or even time with family. A decision to maximise physical safety could mean putting spiritual or psychological safety at risk. Through this exercise, you make the unavoidable trade-offs explicit and, in so doing, restore your sense of control over your life. You reaffirm your responsibility for your life and fully own your power to shape the future.

When you are clear about your values and what is truly important to you in life, you will be able to present your decision to others in an objective way. This allows clear, dispassionate discussion about your choices and circumvents emotional entanglements like criticism, guilt trips, or recriminations that will inevitably arise when decisions are made or avoided in an unconscious manner.

Every time you are faced with a tough decision, you are presented with an opportunity to develop deeper self-awareness and appreciation of what makes you tick. The more you practice effective decision-making, the easier it gets and the more adept you become at making difficult choices. ■