

## 5 | Decision & Commitment

ARE YOU the kind of person who just drifts along and lets life happen? Or, when you know you need to do something, do you take a long time to convince yourself? Then, are you easily distracted? Or are you someone who makes clear decisions and commitments even before you know how you're going to achieve that goal. Do you keep yourself on track when you've made a commitment?

In this chapter, you'll discover the importance of consistently making clear decisions and the power that a commitment has to shift your mental state and your level of energy in any situation. You'll also see how commitments spark new ideas and solutions that you would never have had otherwise.

### Chapter Theme Outcomes

Discover or learn more about the importance of decisions and the power of making firm, clear commitments.

By engaging in this chapter you will:

- ✓ Discover the need for, and the secret to, quick, easy, clear decision-making;
- ✓ Recognise where you might be lacking clarity and what you can do about it;
- ✓ Learn what you can put in place so that you can make quick, clear decisions in every situation;
- ✓ Know how to organise your life according to what's most important to you and what you're best at.



**KEY CONCEPT - TAKE NOTE**

## Decision & Commitment

A DECISION is a mental action that leads to the elimination of one option—or range of options—for the sake of another. In fact, the Latin root of the word decision is most telling: *decidere*, meaning “to cut off”. If you look at it, every decision—even a win-win decision—always involves a cutting off of one path, or course of action, over another. To be with one person, you’re asked to eliminate being with others. To pursue a career in one field, you have to forego others. To own a Windows PC, you have to walk away from a Mac. Sheesh, this is difficult stuff!

In addition, decisions are forced on you by the movement of life. You get to a certain age and you have to decide on a career. You get to the end of your contract and you have to decide whether to renew it. The important point to note here is that life keeps moving, and it gives you a brief window to have your say. You can take that opportunity or not. The train is going to leave the station and you can get on that train, or not.

In fact, as Napoleon Hill, author of one of the earliest and best self-help books, *Think & Grow Rich*, wrote, “Life is a draughts board, and the player opposite you is time. If you hesitate before moving, or neglect to move promptly, your draughts will be wiped off the board by time. You are playing against a partner who will not tolerate indecision!”

No wonder that the world-famous life coach Anthony Robbins places so much emphasis on the importance and power of decisions. “It is in the moments of decision that your destiny is shaped,” he says.

Right there sits the clue as to why you may sometimes struggle to make decisions. The ego, you saw in the chapter on the enneagram, starts out as a defence mechanism. It gets set up, to a large degree, as a strategy for avoiding what you don’t like. This continues into adult life, where your ego still tries to either control, or resist, any movement or change in a direction that it doesn’t like.

You’re likely to demonstrate this control or resistance by either leaping forward impulsively with decisions, in an attempt to control the situation very tightly, or, at the other end of the spectrum, by avoiding the decision

entirely. Either way, those are indicators that the ego is trying to prevent the changes that it doesn't want.

Decisions are necessary, as we saw, to keep pace with life, and life doesn't really stand around waiting to find out what you want. Therefore, it's not about getting those decisions "right" so much as it is about making them fast enough that you don't get left behind. Therefore, you're better off being like that sportsperson on the field, who knows that any decision is better than no decision. This was certainly the view of Theodore Roosevelt, who said, "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

Of course, a deliberate decision to *not* act, or to leave a situation to take its own course, is still a decision, which is different from doing nothing in the sense of just ignoring it and hoping it will go away. It's about making decisions and being willing to deal with the consequences. The more you can do this, the more you'll reduce stress and improve your experience of life.




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## THE SCIENCE / THE SOURCE

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### *The Role of Emotions in Decisions*

EMOTIONS HAVE received a bad rap when it comes to decision-making. They've been seen as interfering to the point that, in business, it's often said that you need to "keep emotions out of the decision". Women, in particular, have borne the brunt of this prejudice. Yet, a number of studies have shown that emotions are essential to good decision-making—and that you use them in ways that you don't even realise.

Back in the 1950s, the prefrontal lobotomy was a widely used "treatment" for people who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, or who had severe OCD or depression. Essentially, it involved severing the fibres that connected the prefrontal cortex to the rest of the brain.

The prefrontal cortex is the area recognised for, inter alia, complex cognitive behaviour, decision-making and social behaviour. Yet these operations removed, not only intellectual capacity, but also emotional capacity. This served as an early clue that emotions and decision-making were bound up.

Many years later, one of the world's leading neuroscientists, Dr Antonio Damasio, made a similar finding with one of his patients, a successful businessman whom he named Elliott. Elliott had suffered brain damage as a result of a tumour and subsequent surgery for removal. According to Damasio, "Elliott emerged as a man with a normal intellect who was unable to decide properly, especially when the decision involved personal or social matters." Apparently, it took Elliott 30 minutes to choose an appointment time, and even longer to decide where to have lunch, and he even struggled to decide what colour pen to use to fill out office forms. All this despite the fact that he remained in the 97th percentile in terms of his IQ score.

Damasio provided Elliott as a case study in his 1994 book, *Descarte's Error*, in which, according to the Amazon blurb, Damasio "challenged traditional ideas about the connection between emotions and rationality" and proffered that "emotions are not a luxury, they are essential to rational thinking and to normal social behaviour". In fact, far from excluding them, we can't do without them, he insists.

The orbitofrontal cortex is a region within the prefrontal cortex of the brain which is involved in the cognitive processing of decision-making. The amygdala, we know, is the seat of our most primitive reactions, in particular our fight-or-flight response, and therefore the wellspring of our emotions. Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis describes the interplay between the two. It has the amygdala and the orbitofrontal cortex being intricately linked to form a neural circuit critical for judgment and decision-making.

"Nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality (the orbitofrontal cortex) not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation (the amygdala), but also from it and with it," he wrote in *Descarte's Error*.

This statement implies that emotions provide additional information, for example in the form of motivation and meaning, to rational factors when making decisions. Without it, for starters, we'd get stuck in analysis paralysis. Then, as the author of *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer, points out, "Emotion and motivation

share the same Latin root, *movere*, which means to move. The world is full of things and it is our feelings that help us choose [and therefore move] among them.”

Lehrer postulates that our best decisions are a finely tuned blend of both feeling and reason—and the precise mix depends on the situation. He states that “Emotions are profoundly smart and constantly learning, they are not simply animal instincts that must be tamed.”

So, what goes into making a good decision? Well, the first thing to recognise is that when you’re facing a decision, you’re effectively attempting to answer a question. Usually, that question is something like, *How can I get what I want?* This usually points you back to your values, which, remember, you’re committed to more than anything, to the point that you’re willing to die for them—assuming that you’re human and just like everybody else.

This is the one reason why we tend to make the same decision again and again throughout our lives, each time with different content. Think about that guy who misses his child’s birthday, not once, but again and again. Although the content of the situation appears different each time, in effect, he’s just demonstrating—unconsciously, without awareness—his commitment to his priority of values.

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Or, another question that you might effectively be trying to answer when facing a decision goes like this: *How can I make sure that the thing I fear most doesn’t happen?* Remember that enneagram avoidance area, that red zone trigger? Well, presuming again that you’re human and much like everybody else, then you’re likely to be just as committed to avoiding that thing as you are to living out your priority of values. No wonder, then that you can often find yourself getting stuck, or getting into conflict with other people, with regards to a decision because you’re trying to control or resist a particular outcome.

In the *Practical Mindfulness* program we show that you're not so much in charge of every situation as you are a part of the situation—and that you're far less able to direct the situation than you would like to believe. Therefore, if your question is all about you and what you want, it's likely to be out of sync with the reality of the situation, or the reality of life. It's a harsh truth that's coming up here, but life doesn't always care too much about what you want. It's not a giant ATM waiting for you to come and type in your PIN code and make your withdrawal.

Therefore, a better question that you can use to guide your decision-making would be one that takes the reality of life into account—the reality that you're part of the bigger picture, you're part of what wants to happen in the situation. So that would be a better question then, wouldn't it? Asking, *What wants to happen in this situation? Or, What might happen in this situation that might turn out OK, even if it's not what I want?* Then you might ask, *What's my part in that? Or, What do I need to do?*

If those questions don't entirely work for you, the principle still stands. When you're making a decision, you're effectively asking a question. If you can identify what question you're asking and then address whether that's the best question to be asking in the situation, you'll be taking the essential step towards better decision-making. The next step would be to determine what would be the best question to be asking and addressing, preferably one that doesn't assume that you're the master of the universe, because that's not realistic, no matter how much you've developed the power of your word!



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#### REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

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### Vasbyt!—The Mother of All Challenges

I SERVED my mandatory national service in the South African military during the late 1980s. On the officers' course, you knew that one day you would be woken up for the endurance hike that was commonly known as *Vasbyt*.

*Vasbyt* is an Afrikaans word that translates to “bite the bullet” and it's a perfect moniker for this activity, which is an adventure race on steroids in which the training officers do their very best to break you psychologically.

To kick it off, they woke us with sirens in the middle of the night. They allocated equipment for us to carry, but insufficient materials to make the braces we needed to carry it on. Even so, we had to lug this equipment along a narrow crevice of space that ran between a steep embankment and a railway line. For miles. For hours. For a whole day, it turned out.

Towards sunset, we were allowed to drop our load and we marched on easier terrain. Up ahead was a luxurious-looking tent. Ah, this would not be so bad, we all thought. We were directed past the tent, down the road and into the night.

All through the night we were given scouting exercises to do. If you returned without the right information, you were sent back. It was freezing cold, so that if you sat still for too long you froze. All the while, officers drove along the route in trucks offering you a ride back to camp if you wanted to give up. Many did.

The next day things got tougher, and more pointless, and the encouragement was still there for you to give up and hop on a truck and go home. Today, thirty years later, I still remember clearly the moment on that second day when I decided that I would not give up. I would finish this. I would own it. I would conquer it. I would make it my own.

At that moment I felt a surge of energy flood through me. I felt alive and powerful in a way that I had never known.

By day three I had no food left. By day four, it was each to his own and you had to find your way home, before cut-off time. For the last half a day we walked back along that railway line. Everyone was too exhausted and hungry to even speak. You just put one foot in front of the other and dared not stop.

I just made the cut-off time and, soon after, I found myself back in my bungalow. I felt reluctant to remove my backpack. *Is that all?* I thought. *That wasn't so bad! I could go again!* I felt that I could do more. The four days seemed to have flown by.

Before the army, I had always enjoyed running for fitness. I had run a distance of five to eight kilometres, almost daily, throughout

my teenage years. When I returned home after having completed *Vasbyt*, I noticed that my running times dropped by a quarter.

The reason? I had always paced myself and kept something in reserve. After *Vasbyt*, I knew that it was all in the mind, that you could push yourself so much harder and that, when you did, you entered the zone, that place where nothing mattered, where pain was pleasure, and you could go forever—and all because of a decision to totally own an apparently impossible activity!

Think about times when you've made a decision. Perhaps it was to resign from your lousy job or to finally leave a destructive relationship. Or to start a new business, or a new relationship. There's a tremendous amount of energy that comes with any decision, as illustrated in the previous, real-life example. It's easy, then, to take action at the point of decision. In fact, the energy compels you to. Very often, you get a positive response from life. Some big coincidence happens that seems to confirm your decision. It's like you're being given some big reward from the universe for finally taking action.

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The challenge, then, is to sustain that energy and continue with that commitment, with taking action in that direction. You can quickly develop doubts, like that good old buyer's remorse. It's realistic to pay attention to that, and more often than not, it's the old ego defence mechanism, that old self, that small self that held you in that place for so long, that's having one last-gasp attempt to survive by getting you back. Be careful, when you've made a decision, to refer back to the principle of integrity and being your word. Stay with the decision, stay with the commitment, despite what those niggly doubts may tell you—and you can be sure they'll know exactly what arguments to throw at you!

You can probably see that, more than anything, decisions require courage. They also result in movement and the elimination of options. So, apart from asking yourself better questions, you need to embrace the movement of life and see that things often turn out OK, or even better than you'd hoped. This

will give you the courage you need and the willingness to move with life. In fact, you'd be well advised to gather some evidence from your past when that was the case.

Secondly, you need to have—or to develop—the willingness to let go of options, to cut your losses, to take one single path and find the riches that become available by taking that path, that would not have become available if you'd tried to keep your options open. Once again, gather some evidence from your life of when eliminating a range of options for the sake of one particular option resulted in a positive outcome, whether it was in terms of knowledge, experience, love, career, money, or some other factor.

Here's one more thing to know about decisions. When you get up on a weekday morning, and you have to get the kids to school and yourself to work, there's not much debating to do, is there? Your priorities and decisions are handed to you by the very clear and tight deadlines you have, and to which you are most definitely committed. Conversely, when you wake up on a Sunday morning and there are no plans, you can debate endlessly about what to do, and when. The difference? There is no commitment to any particular activity or outcome, and no deadlines.

The thing to see here is the link between having a tightly defined context and decision-making. The more clear your context is, the more the decisions just present themselves, there's no debate needed. On weekdays, your context for decision-making is provided by the "clear and tight deadlines" and the loop is closed by your commitment to those deadlines. On weekends, there's no such thing and so you lay around, slow to decide anything.

Naturally, this brings us back, once more, to the Kilimanjaro example. You gave yourself a clear context (climb Kilimanjaro) and a tight deadline (six months), and made a firm commitment to that deadline. Suddenly, you knew exactly what to do, evidenced by the new thoughts that arose the next day.

So, what does this mean? It means be as busy as you can. Ha ha, that's a joke. It means that you should always know where you're going. Begin with the end in mind. Have a clear goal or outcome or intention. Then commit to a deadline. You'll find that most of your decisions will make themselves.

We'll revisit this subject on a much bigger scale in Chapter 12, the final chapter, when you create your *Legacy & Lifestyle Statement*. For now, before you leave this page, what decision do you choose to make?!