

Making Choices (A Simple Choice Model)

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You make hundreds, maybe thousands of choices a day. Occasionally, a big decision—over which you anguish—comes along, but most choices are pretty routine and relatively easy.

Has it ever occurred to you that where you are in life today is a function of thousands of days, each filled with hundreds of choices? If you think back, I'm sure there are some decisions you've made that, had you chosen differently, your circumstances would be quite different today. That makes you realize the overwhelming truth that where you will be in the not-so-distant future involves the many choices you make today and tomorrow!

My work with students, family members, hourly workers, and organizational leaders has caused me to be very aware that many people give little thought to the process they use to make decisions. This article's purpose is to break down the process of making decisions into its component parts.

Most decisions you make begin with "a situation" that you (or someone you support) is facing.

In response to that situation, you (or the friend, colleague, or team member who has sought your help) might do just about anything! Therefore, the second step in this simple "choice model" is "option generation," an overt process of creativity in which you imagine a variety of alternatives.

As anyone who has been trained in the technique of brainstorming knows, this is where you call upon your creative juices! No evaluating at this stage, just crank out as many ideas as you can!

The next step is evaluating all those imaginative ideas to whittle down to the one you believe will deliver what you'd most like to occur. This step is called "option selection," and it's really the crux of the choice-making process. When pushed for time, this is where most people want to focus.

Though this step could be analyzed very scientifically, people often decide quickly what action to take. For example, a colleague or team member asks you, "What would you do in this situation?" As a respected ally desiring to help, you think and then offer your response. The person with the situation then compares your answer with their own thoughts and considers that a rigorous evaluation process.

Finally, it's time to take action. Some people forget that nothing happens until you DO something. Seriously, some people have many ideas (and generate lots of "to do" lists) but have a hard time actually accomplishing the tasks. Once you make the mental decision, it's quite simple—just do it!

There's more to the model! For every action you take, there are outcomes. Actually, there are really two outcomes, differentiated by the passage of time. The first one is "short-term outcomes" and eventually, the "long-term outcomes" make their presence known.

We humans like immediate response, so we usually make our choices based on how rewarding the "short-term outcomes" are likely to be. If I eat a chocolate chip cookie, the immediate outcome is that my sweet tooth is pleased. I tend to overlook the long-term effect of that cookie filling a few fat cells around my waistline!

The first part of this model, where you do your thinking, gives you insight as to what's important to you and what you like best. Though you may consciously evaluate the possible outcomes, the truth is that most choices are made based on the value system you've developed to this point in your life. That's usually not a conscious process. Your values are so ingrained in you, so much a part of who you are that many people are not able to articulate their values when asked about them.

Interestingly enough, once you take whatever action you've chosen, your values and desires no longer have any effect. The outcomes are determined solely by the principles that God set into place when He created the universe. People are often surprised by the effects of their behaviors, especially that the "long-term outcomes" are so different from what they had anticipated.

Regret and guilt are sometimes the long-term outcomes of behaviors. Recognizing that we all make mistakes, forgiving ourselves and being more conscious next time may keep us from repeating those particularly hard choices.