

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 deliberate extensively--comes along, but most choices are 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) are 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 potential 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 uniquely 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 extensively, people often decide quickly what action to take. For example, a colleague or team member asks, "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 existing thoughts/beliefs and considers that to be a rigorous evaluation process.

Finally, it's time to act. Nothing happens, of course, until you DO something. Some people have many ideas (and generate many "to-do" lists) but have a hard time accomplishing the selected tasks. Once you make the mental decision, that which you claim you want, it's simple--just do it!

There's more to the model! For every action you take, there are outcomes. Practically, there are 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 an immediate response, so we far too frequently make our choices based on how rewarding we speculate 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 probable long-term effect of that cookie filling a few fat cells around my waistline--yet that is what will happen soon after my bite!

The first part of this model, where you do your thinking, gives you insight as to what's important to you and what you prefer (your values). Though you may consciously evaluate the possible outcomes, the truth is that most choices are made based on the value system you've developed over the years. 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 to describe them.

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 frequently surprised by the effects of their behaviors, especially since the "long-term outcomes" are often so different from what they had anticipated.

Regret and guilt are sometimes the long-term outcomes of behaviors. Recognizing that we all make mistakes, we can forgive ourselves and be more conscious next time in our option-generation and option-selection. This will likely help us in the future to make decisions with better long-term outcomes!