

How to Form the Decisiveness Habit

I've had several people ask me lately about what they can do about indecisiveness, and it made me realize that this is actually something I'm pretty good at: being decisive.

Making decisions can be difficult, especially when there's no clear choice. But being indecisive, when you're at the cusp of one of these tough decisions, can come at high costs:

- Not taking action can cost you an opportunity, or cost money and time as you delay.
- People waiting on you to make a decision can get frustrated.
- You can feel stress about your indecisiveness, and stress about how you're making people wait.

People who are plagued with indecisiveness generally know they don't want to be that way, so I won't belabor the point. It's not fun, and I feel compassion for those who have this difficulty.

So how can we form the habit of being decisive instead?

It's about recognizing what's going on when you're stuck with a decision, as it's happening. And then deciding to go with a new set of habits around your decision-making.

Recognizing What's Going On

Why do we get stuck making decisions? It's one of our mind's most common habitual reactions around uncertainty.

Let's say we have a choice to make, about hiring Contractor A or Contractor B. It can be very tough, because we honestly don't know which one will perform better, is more trustworthy, or who might screw things up for us.

So we have a lot of uncertainty. Our minds don't like this uncertainty, so there are some things we might do to get away from it:

- **Do a bunch of research.** This is one of the most common things we do when we feel uncertainty. We do an online search, read all about it, try to gain more certainty by gaining more information. There's nothing wrong with this — in fact, in this decision, it's probably a good idea — but it's still important to recognize that we're trying to get more certainty because we're feeling uncertainty. At the end, we might have more information, but there's still a lot of uncertainty.
- **Write out a pros and cons list.** Or a cost-benefits analysis. Or some other kind of

rational decision-making tool. I've made spreadsheets where I list different factors/criteria, then give a score for each one, and weight the factors so I can come up with an overall score. It was great. I still had uncertainty. These tools are helpful, but just recognize that they are a way to get away from uncertainty, and at the end, you'll still have uncertainty.

- **Ask a bunch of people about their opinion.** Or read a bunch of reviews. Again, this is not a bad idea. Just recognize that at the end of the day, you'll still have uncertainty.
- **Put off the decision.** This is the classic response to uncertainty — get away from the uncertainty, don't think about it, delay. This often comes after some of the above strategies. And it doesn't get you away from the uncertainty, because it stays with you, giving you stress.

These are some of the common ways we habitually deal with the uncertainty of a decision. But none of them solve the problem for us (even if the first few can be helpful tactics).

We are uncertain about:

- What the best choice might be
- Whether there will be negative consequences of the choice
- Whether we'll look dumb to others if we make the wrong choice
- Whether we'll feel dumb, or ripped off, and regret it for years to come
- Whether we'll be OK if we make the wrong choice

This last bit is the real heart of the matter. There is no "right" choice, but we worry that if we make the wrong choice, things won't be OK. We might dream up disaster scenarios, and then get a lot of anxiety about those possibilities. But the truth is, for most choices, we'll be perfectly OK. Let's talk about how we might see that, and what new set of habits might be more helpful.

Creating a New Set of Habits

As we saw in the last section, we can't get rid of the uncertainty around making a decision. We can do everything we can to research, delay, come up with a decision-making system ... and we'll still be unsure of what choice we should make. We'll still feel anxious about it.

So we might just learn to be OK with that uncertainty, and get into the habit of making decisive decisions.

Yes, there will likely be a cost to whatever choice we make. That's true if we make no choice as well — that's a choice, and it has costs. Over the long run, the cost of indecision is usually worse than the cost of making a wrong choice, because we stress out about the indecision for a long time. The stress doesn't make the choice easier, it doesn't make us

happy, it affects our health, it affects our relationships.

Instead, let's just make a decision, and move on. Let go of the stress about whether it's the right choice (there's no such thing) and instead deal with whatever consequences we face. And learn to trust that we'll be OK.

Here's a possible set of habits around decision-making that will lead to greater decisiveness:

1. **Recognize that you're feeling uncertainty.** As you start feeling your habitual indecisiveness, notice that you're feeling uncertainty, and that you're chomping at the bit to get away from it. You want to get some certainty, or failing that, put off making the decision. You're feeling some stress from this as well. The earlier you can recognize this, the better.
2. **Deal with the uncertainty with curiosity.** Once you notice you're feeling uncertainty, drop from your head into your body — notice the physical sensations of uncertainty in your body. Where is it located, and what is the texture of the sensation? Often it's a tightness in the chest. Stay with this feeling for a moment or two, not worrying about the decision you have to make, but instead being curious about the physical feeling. Does it change? Does it move? Is it unbearable, or can you stay with it for a bit? Can you relax around the physical feeling?
3. **Get the info & evaluate as best you can.** Now that you realize the uncertainty isn't something you need to run from, you can just make the best decision you're able to make. That might mean doing some research, gathering information, even asking for others' opinions if you have time. Don't let this delay your decision, but a bit of information doesn't hurt. Just don't procrastinate by trying to gather every single bit of info you can. Sometimes it's just 5 minutes of research, or a bit more for a bigger decision. Evaluate the costs and benefits — what are the possible costs of making the decision? Are the potential benefits worth it? In the worst-case scenario, is it the end of the world? Can you deal with these consequences? Again, don't take forever evaluating all of this, just give these things some consideration. Again, it could just be 5 minutes of weighing risks and benefits.
4. **Just dive in.** Instead of staying at the edge of the water, wringing your hands and fretting about the uncertainty — dive in! You've already given it enough thought — make the decision, and take action. Pull the trigger. Let loose the bowstring. Get in the habit of saying, "Enough thinking, time for action!"
5. **Don't look back — deal with what comes up.** Now that you've made the decision, get out of the habit of second-guessing yourself, worrying that you made the wrong decision. Just follow through with it, until you can see the consequences — both negative *and* positive. Cherish the positive consequences, and take the negative consequences in stride. It's no big deal — you can deal with it. It's like surfing: are you

going to bemoan the fact that the wave didn't break exactly as you'd hoped, or are you just going to flow with the wave?

6. **See that you're OK.** Whatever happens, ask yourself, "Am I OK?" The answer is almost invariably "Yes." With time, you'll see that this habit of decisiveness isn't so bad, that things generally turn out OK, and letting go of the worry is actually a relief.

That might seem like a lot of steps, but actually it's just recognizing the uncertainty, dropping into your body and staying with the feeling in curiosity, gathering info and making the best decision you can, and then taking action and dealing with what comes up. And seeing that in the end, everything is just fine.

How do you build the habit?

By keeping this habit at the forefront of your mind for a month. Noticing as often as you can when your old habit of indecisiveness comes up, and then putting this into action as best you can each time. Replace the old habit with the new one. With joy.

And in the end, notice that you're moving faster, you're learning to trust your gut, you're becoming more trustworthy to yourself and to others, you're learning that you can deal with whatever consequences come up. That's worth putting in some extra effort to form this new habit.