

# Decisions, Decisions

"...people are plagued by a frantic fear of missing out... Naturally, they hunger to seize every opportunity and taste every experience... But by not renouncing any of them they spread themselves thin.

...If you live in this way, you turn into a shrewd tactician, making a series of cautious semi commitments without really surrendering to some larger purpose.

You lose the ability to say a hundred no's for the sake of one overwhelming and fulfilling *yes*."

David Brooks  
*The Road to Character* <sup>3</sup>

Ever heard the term “decision paralysis”? If you’ve ever approached the toothpaste aisle in your local grocery store and attempted to make a selection, then I’m sure you’ve felt it. “decision paralysis” is a legitimate phrase that is used to describe our modern inability to make decisions when presented with an overwhelming amount of choices. And it comes as no surprise when you consider the insane amount of stimulation we receive on a daily basis on everything from television screens to the technology that is literally attached to our bodies.

In the aforementioned quote, David Brooks captures this dilemma that we face and the way it impacts our character and our choices. He stresses that by seeking every option available, we actually never gain depth in *any* option. David Brooks was talking about FOMO, fear of missing out, before the acronym rose to popularity on shirts, hats, and hashtags. But all jokes aside, this fear is proving to be one of society's greatest epidemics. By avoiding a clear and intentional focus, we're taking the inch-deep, mile-wide approach to life, and we're missing the potential our lives could reach.

I still experience this when I find a day to myself. I begin to get overwhelmed as I try to plan and re-plan the day to ensure it's the most "productive", and before I know it, I have spent so much time overthinking and worrying about packing it all in that I never truly enjoy the time that was meant for me. I place value on so *many* things that I miss out on genuinely valuing *anything*.

But while our society is often referred to as over-stimulated and driven by instant gratification, I propose that this criticism only scratches the surface of the issue at hand. I believe these choices are a direct response to something deeper and more painful. When we focus on materialistic aspects of life, it's often as an avoidance tactic so that we don't have to dig deep to confront *real* issues. I believe it's the same with society and our decisions. It's not that

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we *want* to make a million decisions, it's that we don't know *how* to make the essential ones.

When we obsess over where to eat, what color to paint a room, or which Netflix show to binge watch next, we distract ourselves from deeper decisions that we subconsciously know that we need to make. Beyond a fear of missing out, I would say that we make or avoid decisions because of our fear of what lies *ahead*. There's a reason the idiom "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't" is still in use today. Regardless of how miserable we are, we often choose to live with our current circumstances simply because we don't want to put in the effort and energy to even *contemplate* an alternative reality that might disappoint us, or worse, others. We let fear of the unknown sabotage our dreams, and in doing so, we settle for less, passively moving along in a direction we never stop to question.

How about you? What is your knee-jerk reaction when you think about change? Consider each of the following situations and your response if that change was present in your life:

- Cell phone company says you'll have to change your phone number
- A friend calls to cancel plans
- You decide to buy a car

- Your employer is downsizing, and you will be laid off.
- You decide to move in with your significant other
- You decide to cut a friend out of your life after too many years of mistrust
- You've been diagnosed with a disease that you'll have to monitor for the rest of your life.

While these scenarios capture widely different ends of the change spectrum, the thread that connects them is that the change will impact many different aspects of your life. Minimally, a change in phone number will require you to gather your contacts, decide on a way to communicate this change to others, and alter any records tied to the previous number. On the opposite end of the spectrum, if you were diagnosed with a lifelong illness, you first need to understand what this means in the scope of your life, begin working with doctors to set up a strategic plan, set up new lifestyle habits, and a million more life-altering decisions. But these two examples focus on change that happens *to us*. What about the three examples above with the word “decide” in them? When you processed those, did you get the sense that the change would be a little *easier* to face, because there was “control” in the decision making?

I've faced an overwhelming amount of change in my life throughout the process of my divorce, and

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I've spent a lot of time reflecting on change that we *choose* versus change that happens *to* us. I'm still not certain that one is easier to face than the other. I guess when change happens *to* you, you can point your finger to a cause beyond yourself—God, the weather, a scapegoat, the economy. But when you *choose* change in your life, by making a decision, it can feel as though you are walking on eggshells, trying to prove to yourself and anyone who matters to you—and many who *don't*—that this was the right choice. When you *make* a decision that causes change in your life, you not only live through the logistical shifts, you also bear the burden of the decision itself.

When a friend calls to cancel plans, it's easy to say, "she's so unreliable", or the opposite, "he's got a lot on his plate, so it's understandable". We get to *decide*, as an outside observer, how we want to *respond* to the change that has been placed upon us. However, when you *decide* to be the decision-maker, by cutting a friend out of your life, you're forced to own that decision. Sure, you can point to all of the things she did "wrong" and all of the ways she proved that she couldn't be trusted, but at the end of the day, *you* cut the cord. *You* altered the future for both of you. It's obvious, then, why most of us *don't* choose change in our lives. Making a decision requires accountability and a sense of responsibility over how life plays out from there; whereas, when we avoid changes that we need to make, we tell

ourselves that we just have to accept the reality we've been dealt. But that's just a lie we tell ourselves, isn't it? No choice is *still* a choice. When we avoid making decisions or course-correcting in our lives, we defer to the excuse that the universe or God already has a plan that is beyond our control, and we are simply following a script with no free will. While my faith leads me to believe that God *is* in control, and He *does* have a plan for me, I also understand that it is up to **me** to decide if/how I follow His lead. I believe that this is why intentionally making choices, as difficult as they might be, gives us a greater sense of purpose and control, because we can visibly see our hand in *creating* the future we envision.

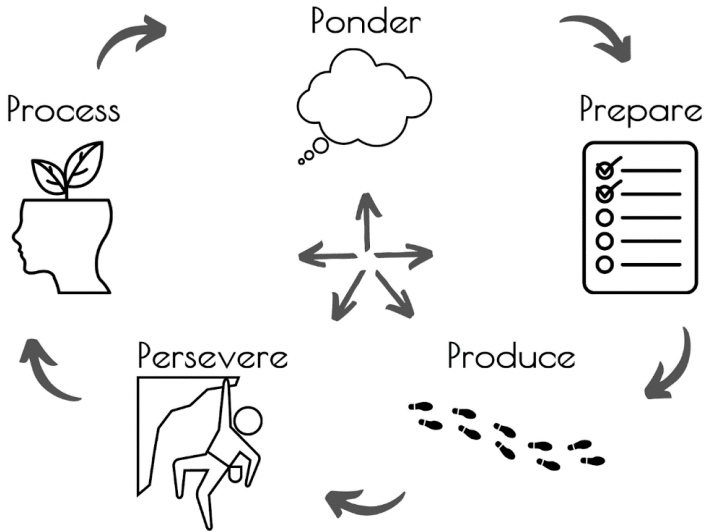
Ultimately, we need to stop allowing ourselves to have it both ways. Either we are in control every minute of every day, or we are just along for the ride. So which is it? When you look back at the scenarios above, it's true that you had a *choice* in initiating a few of them. However, every one of those scenarios required a *response*, and those are often the most influential decisions that we make. It seems like a cycle, then. Even when change comes into your life that you didn't choose, you make the decision to respond positively or negatively, which will ultimately impact future events in your life. *Choosing* change and *responding to* change aren't mutually exclusive, though. They are

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interwoven throughout life. It's just easier for us to excuse one over the other.

It is with this paradox of fear around making decisions, alongside the truth that we are constantly making them, that I framed out these five states of decision making. If I've learned anything in my own journeys, it's that every moment of life is driven by emotion. We want to believe that if we just (fill in the blank), we'll be able to logically proceed and find our happy ending. But that's not how we're wired, and that's not how life works. When our emotions are running especially high, controlling every aspect of our day-to-day life, logical guideposts can help us place one foot in front of the other. That is the mission of these five states:

## THE 5 STATES OF DECISION PERMISSION



While the states are laid out in a sequential order, my experiences have made me well aware that life does not always afford us the opportunity to work through all of them, let alone in a sequential fashion. This is the purpose behind the roles of both the linear arrows and the central, multi-directional arrows. The linear arrows remind us that when we *have* the luxury of foresight regarding a decision that lies ahead, it's best to start with Ponder, then Prepare, Produce, Persevere, and finally, Process at



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the end. However, when we are well into decision making, or one has been made *for* us, the multi-directional arrows remind us that we can immerse ourselves in the appropriate state that meets our needs at that moment in our lives. As you find yourself seeking Decision Permission throughout your life, hop chapters like a “choose your own adventure” novel. Already know what a successful ending to your current decision will look like? Skip to Produce so that you can begin the work. Were you Pondering a career change when, suddenly, you were laid off? Skip over Ponder; it’s time to Prepare.

Each state has no concrete time limit; flow back and forth among them just as life ebbs and flows. For instance, you may have thought that your moving days were over now that you were settled into your new city, and so you began to Process all that you had been through when, unexpectedly, your employer informs you that you will be transferring again. At this point, you’ll have to slide back to Prepare your next steps. Regardless of where you are in your own journey, it’s imperative to note that each state is intentionally written as a verb, which means each will require action on your part. As they say, “nothing great comes easy”, and I want to be sure to establish that same awareness in the work you’re about to embark on. If you view these states as coaches along a personal journey rather than a “how to” of perfect planning, then I promise that

you'll find what you're looking for, and you'll begin to trust yourself in the process.

Though the name of each state is mostly self-evident, I organized the following "State Awareness Guide" so that you can reflect on your current Decision Permission status and the state that you most identify with at this time. My hope is that this guide will help you gain an initial understanding of how these states progress and to know which state to visit as new challenges come into your life.

## State Awareness Guide

	Ponder	Prepare	Produce	Persevere	Process
<p>“I” statements you are likely to feel:</p>	<p>I...</p> <p>...feel like I've been in a rut for some time.</p> <p>...feel like I'm missing something.</p> <p>...might have a tough decision to make.</p> <p>...don't know where to begin.</p>	<p>I...</p> <p>...am mostly aware of the decision I need to make.</p> <p>...am not ready to make a decision just yet.</p> <p>...don't know how to take the first step toward the decision I need to make.</p>	<p>I...</p> <p>...have given myself permission.</p> <p>...need to take action.</p> <p>...have been thinking about this for a long time.</p> <p>...am letting fear keep me from doing what I need to do.</p>	<p>I...</p> <p>...made a decision, but I'm starting to back-pedal.</p> <p>...need strength to stick to my decision.</p> <p>...need re-assurance that I'm doing the right thing.</p>	<p>I...</p> <p>...have developed a “new normal” since making my decision.</p> <p>...can talk about the decision without crying and/or getting worked up.</p> <p>...am struggling to understand how these struggles served any purpose in my life.</p>
<p>Questioning may look like:</p>	<p>What should I do?</p>	<p>What would this change look like?</p>	<p>How would I do this?</p>	<p>How do I keep going?</p>	<p>What can I take away from this experience?</p>
<p>Specific Example: <i>(relationship struggles)</i></p>	<p>Should we be together?</p>	<p>What would it look like if we weren't together?</p>	<p>What steps do I take to leave?</p>	<p>How do I stand by my decision to leave?</p>	<p>What is there to be learned from this journey?</p>

Each state begins with a quote and ends with guiding questions to aid in reflection. I encourage you to challenge yourself with these two resources, and I'm speaking as a person who used to skip right over that *fluff* and get to the "good stuff"! Giving yourself Decision Permission evolves from a place of mindfulness, and there is no simpler practice of mindfulness than pausing to read and truly contemplate what you've just read. This small, routine practice will allow you the space to quiet the opinions of others and, instead, listen more carefully to the truth within. Are you ready? Read. Digest. Reflect. That's all for now.

## Decision Questions for Reflection

- Which decisions seem easier: those I make or those made for me?
- What types of decisions would I categorize as small or easy to handle?
- What types of decisions would I categorize as a struggle or life-changing?
- When I have to make decisions, do I have any patterns for working through them?
- How do I feel/ respond after I make a decision that will impact others?
- How do I feel/ respond after a decision is made for me?
- Which part of decision making is most difficult for me?