

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung)

Making decisions – The dilemma

When we have to make (important) decisions, it is human nature for our thoughts go in circles and for us to desperately try to make the 'right' decision. The problem with this is that it sometimes takes a very long time before a certain path clearly looks better than the other. Sometimes we don't have the time to wait until this is the case and we 'just have to choose a particular option'. During this time, we can spend entire days, weeks and even months feeling anxious and stressed, trapped in a cycle of frequently repeating thoughts.

1. *Give yourself time*: Don't put yourself under pressure for not being clear about what you want at this moment (and possibly for a while longer as well). The more you 'fight it', the more difficult the overall situation will be and the lower the likelihood that you will become clear about what you want soon.
2. *Pros-and-cons analysis (see point 3)*: Create a list of pros and cons for each of the options. Sometimes seeing this list in writing is very helpful. Unfortunately, the bigger and more complex the decision, the less helpful this method is. So if doesn't help you, that's okay too. You can always add to it.
3. *There's no perfect way*: As a next step, it's helpful to recognise that there is no perfect way (if there was, there wouldn't be any problems making decisions). Regardless of which decision you make, it's very likely that you'll feel uncertain about it. If you wait until you have no more doubts, you'll probably be waiting for the rest of your life.
4. *It's not possible not to decide*: Even if it doesn't seem like it, you're making a decision every day. As long as you don't choose a new option, you're deciding not to actively make a decision and to stay where you are.
5. *Values for dealing with the situation*: What values and qualities do you want to embody during the next 24 hours, during which you still won't have made a decision? What kind of person do you want to be given the difficult situation you're in or given the decision-making dilemma you're in? How do you want to treat yourself and those close to you during this time?
6. *Set time aside*: Set aside time regularly to think about your question. Look for more information, organise this information, and consciously reflect on your situation and options. Add to your list of pros and cons and think about whether anything has changed.

Adapted from *The Happiness Trap* (Russ Harris)

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7. *Recognise your thought cycles*: Outside of those times set aside as per the advice in point 6, try to recognise that you're falling into the same thought cycle whenever it occurs. For example, say to yourself: 'Ah, my thoughts are stuck in the "what should I study" story again. I'll think about that later during the time I've set aside for it.' Then direct your attention back to whatever it was you were doing.
8. *Give your insecurity space*: It's highly likely that feelings of anxiety and insecurity will come up regularly, regardless of which decision you make. Since it's useless to fight them, let these feelings be there until they subside on their own again. This will minimise their impact and hold on you.
9. *Self-compassion*: Have compassion for yourself for (still) being in this situation. It is human and completely normal not to know things sometimes.

Go through these steps every day. Maybe you'll gain more clarity over time and one option will be more appealing. Even if it takes a while, you'll at least consciously (and confidently) be taking the necessary steps...

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