

Deciding pt.1 What Makes A Decision Process Get Stuck

Why is decision-making more difficult for highly analytical people? How does an ordinary decision turn into days of thinking? What factors cause the decision-making process to get stuck, and why exactly?

Not all brains are wired the same. Some people think a lot, some do not. Some people are fine with not knowing what is coming and just feeling their way through life. Some do need to understand exactly what is going on, why it is happening, and what it means about what is coming. I call the second type a High-processing mind.

High-processing minds:

- Process through words, logic, and analysis
- Their goal is to build a clear, logical picture from the information available
- They do not do well with uncertainty
- Once they start analyzing, the analysis must run to completion
- Analysis reopens when new information comes in or their explanation no longer fits
- They can't leave something until completely understood
- And they need to account for every variable

On the other side, we have intuitive or “feeling” minds, who:

- Process through emotions and gut feelings
- Are more comfortable with uncertainty
- Can make decisions without all the information
- “It feels right” is enough of an answer for them

The distinction here is simplified, but it shows why what works for one mind can do almost nothing for another.

The rest of this article explains why a High-processing mind that already tends to get stuck struggles to decide, or can't decide at all.

What causes the decision process to get stuck

Thinking carefully through a decision isn't a problem in itself. Normally, a person thinks through the information available, reaches a conclusion, revises if new information comes in, and moves on. But add any of the following, and deciding gets harder and harder:

1. **Insufficient Data** – The idea here is that a good decision means knowing all the relevant details and possible outcomes beforehand. Since this is impossible, the focus shifts from making a decision to constantly looking for more information.
2. **False Finality** – Decisions that can be reversed are treated as points of no return. One choice starts to feel like it will decide “everything forever,” raising the stakes until making a decision feels impossible.
3. **Uncertainty Intolerance** – Here, uncertainty is seen as a problem that can be solved by predicting and preparing for what might happen. A single decision turns into going over every possible catastrophe and trying to prevent it.
4. **Self-Worth Contamination** – A decision stops being just about what happens and becomes a judgment on the person making it. Now they have two things to weigh instead of one: not just the likely outcome, but what that outcome will say about who they are – raising the stakes from practical to existential.
5. **Meta-Judgment** – The fact that a decision stays unresolved becomes a problem on its own. On top of the original calculation, there is an extra, urgent one: why is this still unresolved?

Insufficient data

Hardly anyone is analyzing every detail for hours just for the sake of it. The point is to optimize for the best outcome, or, put simply: to pick the absolute best choice there is. On paper, this makes sense. If all information were available beforehand, there would be no mistakes. If we could know exactly what each job offer would be like, and how life would be after accepting each one, we would choose the thing that is right, or wise, or that makes us happy. The problem, though, is that the future is unknown and nobody knows exactly what “happy,” “wise,” or “right” even means in this exact situation.

So a person deciding which job offer to take has to figure out what the best possible choice even means. They make up a definition of “happy at new job” in their head: maybe some challenges, definitely no stress, easy commute, loads of money, short hours, close to a park would be great, cool coworkers, medical care...

Now imagine you had a GPS that could optimize for any combination of the following:

- Scenic route
- Cheap

- Fast
- Convenient
- Smooth roads
- Least turns
- Best weather
- Most rest stops
- Safest
- Shortest
- Best gas stations
- Great food at pit stops
- Avoiding tolls
- Most parking available
- Least traffic
- Best cell service

...and you chose EVERYTHING.

The GPS would never finish calculating. Why? Optimizing for that many variables needs more computing power than a simple device has. And even if that weren't impossible, the GPS would have no way of knowing which parking spot has a space, what the road will actually be like once you pass, and what makes food good for you.

The High-processing brain often has both problems at once: it is trying to optimize for everything without enough processing power, and it is doing that using information that does not exist in the real world.

In practice, it means:

- Going through the same details over and over again, thinking enough traffic data can guarantee a smooth journey
- Comparing this situation to every similar situation that ever happened, hoping yesterday's traffic can predict today's driving time
- Flipping between options endlessly. Route A is faster. Route B has less traffic. Route A has gas stations. Route B has better exits. Route A...
- Keep asking people for opinions, believing someone knows a secret shortcut you haven't heard of

When other people are involved, the problem gets much worse because the amount of missing data explodes.

She said, "It's fine." But does that mean:

- Genuinely fine?
- Annoyed but hiding it?

- Testing to see if you'll push?
- Passive-aggressive?

Each interpretation makes a completely different calculation:

- If it is genuinely fine, then just keep going
- If she is annoyed, then maybe say sorry
- If she is testing, then say something clever
- If she is passive-aggressive, then figure out what you did wrong

In most real-life situations, a decision simply can't be made if we assume that there is one correct answer, and that finding it depends on understanding each detail exactly. What we actually have is not a perfect, exact understanding, but different interpretations and predictions, each depending on the perspective we take. As the perspective changes, the decision changes as well. The process stays open.

False finality

Missing information is only part of the problem. Some decisions stop feeling like ordinary choices and start feeling like permanent turning points. The stakes become so big that every possible outcome has to be examined, predicted, and taken into account.

Why does deciding feel like life or death instead of scenic road trip planning? Because we treat decisions as points of no return, where everything gets signed, stamped, and locked in forever. This is **False Finality**: believing that point B is where the journey ends, when it's actually just where new territory reveals itself.

The GPS illusion:

A lot of people treat decisions exactly like GPS navigation. They imagine the process this way:

- You're at point A, calculating the optimal route to point B (the endpoint, the destination).
- GPS shows the complete route, destination, and the arrival time, where arriving means being done.
- At point B, all the options collapse into one, so the choice determines everything.

In real life, decisions do not resemble GPS planning, but rather fog-of-war in strategy games (like Age of Empires):

- You only see your current position (A) and a bit around you
- Each move reveals more of the map. What looked like endpoint B just lifts the fog
- Point B reveals the new, unknown territory and becomes your new starting point (new A)

- There is ongoing discovery, instead of “final endpoints”

Making a decision doesn't narrow possibilities. It widens them. Decision B lifts the fog and reveals territory that couldn't be seen from A. Options explode, not collapse.

Simplified example:

Tim spends months trying to decide whether to sell his company.

With market changes, not selling could mean watching the business slowly sink with all his money. Selling feels just as final: people he hired, trained, had beers with will lose their jobs. Eight years of his work will be signed away. His life's work will be overtaken by an evil corporation. Everything he built will be reduced to a few dollars in his bank account.

Eventually, he decides to sell. Then buyers start making offers. One wants only a stake in the company. Another wants to keep all employees. A third wants Tim to stay on as a consultant.

For months, Tim thought he was choosing between two inevitable losses: either losing everything or losing his company and keeping some money. What became possible after he decided to make a move was invisible before.

Why we think in GPS terms:

It is difficult to compute decisions involving dozens of variables. But a fog-of-war reality is far more complex than the GPS. To calculate it properly, one would need to take into account:

- All possible outcomes from decision B
- All the new territory each outcome reveals
- All the adjustments available at every new point
- All the unpredictable variables (other humans, unpredictable circumstances, and your changing preferences)

No computer could calculate that. So the brain does what any intelligent system would do: it simplifies.

- Two options (A or B)
- One endpoint
- Two possible outcomes (success or failure)
- Everything final

Result?

Now it is no longer an exploration of unknown territory. It is choosing between two doors that lock behind you, forever. Obviously, with stakes that high and an outcome this final, everyone would rather keep reconsidering than risk making the horribly wrong decision. Again, the process stays open.

Uncertainty intolerance

One of the brain's jobs is to create a full picture from incomplete information in order to deal with uncertainty. The problem starts when uncertainty stops being something to navigate and becomes something to be eliminated.

Why does uncertainty feel intolerable?

Evolutionary advantage: Uncertainty meant a potential threat. The brain evolved to treat “unknown” as “potentially dangerous” — better to assume a threat and survive than miss it and die. (A tiger could be waiting in unknown bushes!)

Brain architecture: The brain can only solve problems with the information it has available. The more unknowns there are, the harder it becomes to figure out what is happening and what should be done about it.

Social programming: Parents showed us the “what if” thinking, rewarded preparation, and punished being caught off-guard. (“Did you take your jacket if it gets cold?”) This becomes: uncertainty = danger, preparation = safety. Being prepared is later praised by others, too.

Preparation proves itself: If complex situations are still overwhelming with all the preparation, we assume they would be even worse without it. Which just proves that all the preparation was necessary.

If uncertainty means danger and preparation means safety, the natural conclusion is that enough preparation should get rid of uncertainty.

What actually happens — **the simplified example:**

Tim has decided to sell his company. He goes into preparation mode: reviewing the numbers, talking to advisors, estimating valuation, considering possible buyers. Last year's profit is lower than he remembered. Now he feels the need to check every other number, just to be sure nothing catches him off guard. And of course, the deeper he looks, the more numbers he finds that concern him. Each one becomes another thing he might have to explain to a future investor. So he rehearses the possible explanations in his head. The more he rehearses, the more questions appear. What if no buyer is

interested? What if the company is worth half of what he expected? What if a potential investor hears about it, the gossip spreads, the key employees leave, and then the customers get nervous? And revenue drops. And the cash runs out...

At this point, Tim is no longer preparing. He is playing a movie in his head.

How does preparation turn into catastrophizing?

Preparing and planning feel like a “sensible thing to do” — not letting oneself get caught off guard and being a responsible human being. The problem is when “preparation” is no longer about actual events but about imagined possibilities. This looks like a snowball effect — every “what if” is followed by “ok, then...” and another “but what if?” Even the most improbable versions get treated with the same attention, and then connect into what looks like a single chain of events. The result is no longer a set of potential risks, but a dramatic movie.

This movie, once in full motion, has some specific qualities:

- Everything goes wrong simultaneously
- Each problem cascades into the next with no gaps
- Every path leads to the worst possible outcome
- Every scene is played with maximum emotional intensity

Like a thriller with dramatic music, lighting, and costumes.

It would be less of a problem if catastrophizing were limited to a single decision and disappeared afterwards. But preparing for worst-case scenarios creates a self-reinforcing loop:

The brain treats imagined danger similarly to real danger. -> This causes real physical stress (heart racing, sweating)

-> The stress response becomes more and more automatic when imagining possible worst-case scenarios

-> With time, even the idea of deciding causes stress.

The Full Lock: Every decision starts feeling very important, which means that even more analysis is needed, but analyzing causes stress, so there is a need to prepare for the worst-case scenarios, which makes the decision feel even more important and stressful...

Result?

If previous factors made the good decision process difficult, this one makes it almost impossible. Trying to eliminate uncertainty completely is actually the opposite of deciding.

Every “what if?” becomes another thing that needs to be figured out. Hypothetical problems start to pile up. No decision ever feels safe or good enough. Catastrophic scenarios feel real and emotionally convincing, so the pressure to keep preparing grows, with no natural endpoint.

The goal changes. The decision is no longer about “how to get a good outcome?” and becomes “how to prevent all the bad ones”. The difference is enormous — it is like going to the gym with a goal of not getting hurt, humiliating oneself, or twisting an ankle, instead of going there to get gains.

The whole process becomes about getting rid of uncertainty instead of moving forward, and since this is impossible, the process stays open. And exhausting.

Self-worth contamination

Self-worth contamination happens when outcomes become a measure of the person rather than the situation. A result of a decision is no longer just a result. It turns into evidence about who a person is.

The decision is no longer:

- “Should I take this job?”
- “Should I reply to this message?”
- “Should I leave this relationship?”

It becomes: “What does my choice reveal about me?”

The THEREFORE

How does the THEREFORE get installed? A child learns that some traits, needs, emotions, or behaviors are unacceptable. The child does not even need to have those traits. It is enough to learn that being seen as “one of those people” is not a good thing.

- Maybe Tim reached for his mom when she was tired, and she snapped, “Stop being so needy!”
- Maybe he heard his father laughing at an obese woman.
- Maybe parents gossiped about an aunt being a weirdo.

So he learns: being like that is unacceptable. Even worse, if I am like that, I must not be that. I need to overcome it or hide it.

School gives endless opportunities for that lesson to be reinforced.

Being different gets punished. Children are quick to notice and punish any differences. Too quiet, too loud, too emotional, too awkward — anything that stands out becomes a target.

Other children learned their own list of unacceptable traits. When they see those traits in someone else, they point them out, criticize them, or make fun of them, much like what they observed at home.

A person is already looking for confirmation. Once they learn at home that a trait is bad, the brain starts hunting for proof. Rolled eyes, dismissive comments, uncomfortable silence get cataloged as evidence: “the trait really IS unacceptable. Look — everyone agrees.”

The logical conclusion forms:

“Being THIS (needy/anxious/overthinking/emotional) is really unacceptable. THEREFORE if I am that kind of a person, it means I am unacceptable.”

This is the installed THEREFORE — the logical conclusion that influences everything that follows.

What do THEREFOREs have to do with decision-making?

Often when trying to make a decision, a person is running an extra calculation in the background: “What does this mean about me?” If I do this or that, would that mean I am weak / needy / annoying (and THEREFORE unacceptable?)

Three hints that a decision is not really about the decision:

1. Emotional intensity

Deciding whether to send a work email turns into three days of torture. Choosing between two good job offers feels life-threatening. Considering whether to reply to a message ends with lying awake till 3 am in the morning. Stakes are low or medium, intensity — enormous.

2. Concern with how it looks

The practical problem is not really the center of attention. The most important part is how the decision might look to other people. The question is no longer whether the email will achieve the result. It becomes: “Will sending it make me look incompetent? Pushy? Needy?”

3. A worst-case scenario means a judgment

When self-worth is not on the table, even a catastrophic scenario stays practical: “If I miss the plane, I’ll lose my money, miss the meeting, lose the client, and maybe lose the job.” With self-worth

involved, the scenario does not stop there: “If I miss the plane, everyone will think that I’m a pathetic loser who can’t handle basic responsibilities.”

The “everyone” that does not exist

People often think that how important “what they will think about me?” is depends on how important that “they” is. The boss is important, so his opinion matters. A colleague is less important, so what he thinks is not that important either.

But is it really this objective? Mum saying “you look awful in that suit” may have no effect at all, but the same comment from an ex feels soul-crushing. A random stranger’s opinion is generally unimportant, unless they touch on something we are already self-conscious about. And oftentimes the most important judge is the famous everybody (everybody will think I am...) who does not really exist at all.

If it is not about how objectively important the judge is, or whether the judge exists at all, then what can explain how huge the judgment feels?

First, the more invested a person is in creating an impression, the more important others’ judgments in that situation become.

Second, a comment becomes especially powerful when it touches the trait we already marked as unacceptable. If our THEREFORE is built around being needy, incompetent, or unattractive, judgments aiming at those traits will feel way more important than others.

And these two factors combine, causing full self-worth contamination.

In practice, it means that Tim might be sitting at his desk thinking:

- If I decide to sell my company, what will the board think? (and he spent years trying to prove he’s strong to them).
- They might think I am weak, and I do not want them to think I am weak.
- If they do, it will actually mean I am weak (and THEREFORE unacceptable).
- So maybe I shouldn’t sell at all?
- But what would my wife think?

Self-Worth Contamination makes good decision-making extremely difficult because the decision stops being only about consequences and becomes a test of worth.

Result?

The stakes expand from practical to existential. There are now two calculations instead of one. The person is no longer asking only “What will happen if I do this?”, but also “What will this say about me if I do this?”

The number of variables explodes. Interpretations, possible judgments, and what those judgments might mean all have to be taken into account. Most of the data is missing (what other people think, how they interpret events, and how they might respond).

No decision feels safe. Even clearly good options can be rejected if it might suggest that a person is unacceptable.

The process stays open because the person is no longer trying to find what works. They are trying to make a decision that works *and* will look good from every angle.

Meta-judgment

All of the factors stack on one another: incomplete data, false finality, uncertainty intolerance, and existential stakes. And as if that were not enough, there is another layer added on top: judgment about the process itself.

Intelligence is expected to lead to fast, precise decisions. Smart people should understand quickly, decide quickly, and move forward quickly. Confident people should trust their gut. Normal people shouldn't struggle like this.

When someone is stuck in processing for days, they are violating every cultural norm about how smart people should think. The category for “an intelligent person who analyzes for days” does not seem to exist. Someone can be either smart (which means quick) or overthinking (which means broken).

The overthinker notices: “This is taking unusually long. This is not normal.” They compare: “Other people don't do this. They just decide.” (which may be true, or may not — nobody knows what happens inside other people's heads). They judge themselves: “I should be done by now. What's wrong with me?”

Making a good decision is impossible when a person judges themselves about the decision process.

Result?

There are two calculations instead of one, and the second one is taking up the processing power (“Why so long?!”)

A person turns hostile toward themselves, gets angry, anxious, stressed, which makes deciding more and more difficult.

Deciding starts feeling more and more urgent, so a person might feel like they need to “just decide already”. The longer it takes, the less capable a person feels of making a good decision.

Read more

How to work with each of these factors and make decisions more effectively is discussed in PART 2.

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