

Deciding pt.2 What does a healthy decision-making process look like?

What makes a decision-making process effective? How to spot faulty assumptions in your own decision process, and how to train in efficient decision-making.

Overthinkers are well aware there is something wrong with their decision process. They see it in postponing, agonizing over months, or not being able to decide at all. If the problem looks like “slow, dragging, too many variables,” the natural conclusion is that the fix must be the opposite.

So an ideal decision-making process would have to be:

- fast
- efficient
- with the few most important values taken into account in the data set
- done

This is not a good way to think about decisions. A healthy and effective decision process is not a matter of how long it takes or simply how many variables it takes into account.

This becomes clear when we look at faulty decision processes. A faulty decision process can mean taking forever to decide or drowning in unimportant details. But it can also mean making decisions in bursts without thinking them through, or making impulsive, reckless, and premature decisions.

If a decision process can be faulty in completely opposite directions, then neither speed nor the amount of analysis is what makes it healthy, or rather - there is not a single ideal way to decide effectively.

Flexibility

What makes a decision process effective is its flexibility. The goal for an overthinker is therefore not to make the decision faster or the decision process shorter. The goal is to be able to decide in three seconds if needed and be able to decide over months if that is necessary.

One might think that flexibility implies a new simple rule: important decisions should take time and thoroughness, while the simple ones should be made in under a minute. But life does not work that way. The importance of a decision does not change whether someone has three seconds or months to decide.

Economic Calculation

Obviously, the first question one should ask themselves is: is there time to take this decision slowly? If there is, the next question becomes: **Is it actually worth spending time on it?** This is not about weighing the objective importance of the situation, but rather an economic calculation. Time and energy are resources, so is the possible improvement worth using those resources?

An economic calculation means looking at both sides of the equation. The cost is what spending more time on a decision takes away: Am I having fun or am I torturing myself? Am I using time that should be used on other things? The return is what spending that time gives: is it bringing anything? Will the decision become easier if I spend another month on it?

For an overthinker, this is problematic on both sides of the equation. If thinking is experienced as background noise rather than as a resource, then keeping it running on a decision does not feel like a cost at all.

The estimated return is also far from accurate. In the first part of the article, all the elements that contaminate the process were discussed in detail — too many variables, false finality, uncertainty intolerance, self-worth contamination, and meta-judgment. What all of them have in common is that they make getting the decision “right” feel extremely important.

Why more thinking seems to make sense

If getting the decision “right” feels extremely important, then the potential value of more thinking feels obvious.

But the stakes are not enormous because the decision itself is necessarily that important. They are a natural consequence of hugely overestimating what a decision could, or should, achieve: provide complete knowledge, predict future outcomes, control consequences, anticipate other people’s judgments, and ensure that the final choice is socially acceptable — while still appearing perfectly reasonable by any normal standard.

All of those stand on the same premise:

There is a correct choice hidden somewhere, and if the analysis is good enough, it can be found — leading straight to the desired result.

The five factors resulting from that premise:

Insufficient data: The correct choice exists, but some missing variables have not been found yet.

False finality: The correct choice is the one that determines the future, while the wrong choice leads to catastrophe.

Uncertainty intolerance: The correct choice is the one that can remove uncertainty and prevent unwanted outcomes.

Self-worth contamination: The correct choice is the one that also proves something about the person making it.

Meta-judgment: If the correct choice has not been found yet, something is wrong with the process or the person.

A decision is not a calculation that finds the one-and-only correct path to what we want. It is just one choice, and one thing among many that shapes what happens next. We choose based on what we know, what is possible, and what we think we want, which is just a tiny fraction of the variables that shape the future. There is no guarantee that what looks like the absolute best decision today will still look that way tomorrow.

How to realize when thinking can't help

What can be done with the five factors follows directly from what they are. All of them are false assumptions — *something accepted as true without question or proof, but that is false or wrong*. The solution, then, is to understand why each assumption is false and what is true instead.

There are two types of false assumptions here. They are closely related, but differ in an important way:

1. The problem you're trying to fix is not really a problem.

This is the case of False finality and Meta-judgment. Here understanding how the assumption is false is enough to get rid of the block. Once you clearly see that the world does not end with one decision, you can drop the false pressure. When you realize that comparing your way of deciding to someone else's is a waste of time and energy, you can focus on using both more effectively.

2. The problem you're trying to fix with thinking is not fixable by any tool

This is the case with Insufficient Data, Uncertainty Intolerance, and Self-worth Contamination. There are no tools available anywhere, thinking included, that can make us know everything, control what happens next, or manage how other people see us. For some people, it is enough to realize that thinking cannot deliver what it promises. For others, these assumptions require more work, not because they are any more true, but because what lies underneath — discomfort with uncertainty, limiting beliefs, or a need for control — makes thinking seem necessary regardless of whether it actually helps. Addressing each of these underlying issues requires a separate article.

The next section explains how to make flexible decisions and recognize these faulty assumptions on your own.

The exercises

Why exercises and not a method?

Most overthinkers have already tried more than one method for changing themselves or their thinking. The pattern is usually similar:

- An expert explains how the thing should be done
- A person tries it
- The method feels imposed and often not very logical
- It does not seem to take the actual situation into account
- It does not help
- At worst, it is annoying, and another thing that went wrong
- The method is forgotten, and the problem stays.

The first problem with methods is that even if we know that someone is right, it doesn't change much until we understand it ourselves. The second one is even bigger: if there is no right way to make a decision, then following a method to get the decision process "right" makes no sense. The decision process should work for you, and not just look good on paper.

Here, instead of following a set of rules, the task is to watch your own decision process and notice where it stops matching reality: where assumptions get treated as facts, where the stakes become inflated, and where the calculation is aimed at something more thinking can't provide. The exercises are based on the understanding from this and the previous article, so you will need to read both of them before starting.

Fast track

For the next three days, every ordinary decision has to be made within 30 seconds. Shopping, choosing from a menu, replying to a message, booking tickets, deciding what to wear — everything.

If a decision genuinely needs more time, make a provisional decision within 30 seconds and continue from there. The decision can be reconsidered later, but the first choice cannot be postponed.

Mentally note each decision. Pay attention to the thoughts and emotions around each one.

Fast track questions

- Why couldn't you decide?
- What would more time have given you?
- Was there any idea in the first 30 seconds?
- What would have happened if you chose blindly?
- Would you have used a "change your mind" open card?
- How many optimizations were you trying to make?
- If someone was watching, was the process different? (or if no one did, would it have been different had they watched?)
- Which decision seemed impossible to make in 30 seconds, and why?
- Did you regret your decision afterwards?
- If you were choosing for someone else, what would have changed?
- Was the exercise annoying?

Slow track

Find something you want to buy and genuinely care about — something you would normally research and compare. It can be anything: a watch, a trip somewhere, new shoes, as long as the choice matters subjectively.

Make it expensive enough that it counts, but not expensive enough to go broke.

Before starting, deliberately raise the stakes: try to make the absolute best decision possible.

Spend some time each day for 7 days researching and comparing. Do not buy it before the 7 days are over.

Pay attention to what you are thinking and feeling during the research and the final decision

Before starting the exercise, read through the questions below. They serve as a basis for observation during the exercise. Think about what they are trying to uncover, then put them aside until after the

experiment. Do not worry if you forget them. After completing the exercise, return to them and answer them in relation to what you remember from the process.

Slow track questions

- What took more time than necessary?
- What price difference made it cross into impossible?
- How long was it fun?
- Which parts were not fun?
- Would you / did you ask for advice?
- How many variables were taken into account?
- What would happen if you couldn't give it back?
- Which choice did you finally settle on? How soon did you have that choice in mind?
- What would make you regret the decision, and how strongly?
- How many times, if any, did you think about someone else's opinion?
- Was there any self-criticism?

After completing the exercise, analyze the answers through the framework from the article. Which of the five contaminants appeared? How did they influence the decision process? Was the cost of the decision process calculated realistically? Was the expected benefit proportional to the effort, time, and stress invested? Did the analysis actually improve the decision, or was it trying to create certainty that was impossible to achieve?

Note on the exercises

The exercises can be done on your own and will provide a lot of useful material you can analyze yourself. If you feel, though, that an extra insight could be helpful, you can book an initial session [here](#) to work through it together.

Closing point

It might seem that there is a huge gap between this exercise and actually problematic high-stakes decisions. In reality, the gap is exactly what makes it useful.

1. The decisions are small enough that observation and curiosity are possible. You can see what is happening without being overwhelmed by consequences.
2. The exercise is slightly absurd, and because of that it is also interesting. It does not feel like another serious method that needs to be applied correctly.
3. You can notice the problems yourself. The point is for it not to feel like external judgment or someone telling you what is wrong.
4. Because the observations come from your own experience, they stick.

5. Those observations transfer to bigger decisions precisely because they were learned through a real experience. When a high-stakes situation appears later, you do not have to remember someone's advice, but rather your own process.
6. If you notice a faulty decision process in small decisions, you will be aware that it only gets worse when the stakes are higher. This creates its own motivation to work on larger-stakes issues.
7. The exercise itself teaches the flexibility mentioned at the beginning of the article. And once you notice the factors making the decision process faulty yourself, more flexibility is the natural result.

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