

Why We Hate To Choose

When it comes to making decisions, we'd like to think logic prevails. We consider options and choose the most rational alternative. Or do we? In fact, the majority of decisions are actually not based primarily on logic. Logic usually enters the picture well after the decision is made, as a means of rationalising our choice.

The logical, critical thinking part of our brain is called the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex operates with our full awareness but is a very slow processor of information. If you've ever made a pros and cons list, you were doing so using your prefrontal cortex. It is the conscious thinking part of our brain and provides us with the ability to critically examine evidence, compare options and think through situations.

That being said, the majority of decisions are not made in such a rational way. Most of our decisions are made in another part of our brain, called the limbic system, the emotional centre of the brain. In contrast to the prefrontal cortex, the limbic system responds to external stimuli at lightning speed. This area of the brain almost solely functions as part of your subconscious. With the exception of intense emotions such as anger and fear, we are generally not aware of the constant activity of our limbic system. Understanding this emotional centre and its involvement in decision making is extremely useful if we want to move ourselves towards more decisions that will work for us in the future.

There is a good reason the majority of decisions are made in our subconscious. The sheer amount of choice and information in our day to day lives is more than our slow moving conscious brain can handle. As psychologist and author Timothy Wilson points out, we take

in an average of 11 million bits of information per second. There are external factors such as the air temperature, light or sounds in the distance. There are internal factors such as feeling hungry, tired or cold. At a conscious level, we can only process a maximum of 40 bits of information per second. Therefore, the ratio of subconscious to conscious processing is more than 99.9% subconscious. This means that almost all of the information our brain processes at any given moment is occurring subconsciously!

As you may have noticed, the relatively trivial things in life don't get much air time in our conscious mind. Deciding when to turn off the shower in the morning or when to stop adding milk to our coffee are usually subconscious and we barely register that a decision has been made. If it's raining and you're walking outside, you usually speed up to avoid getting wet. If you're hungry and sitting in front of a bowl of fruit, it won't take much mental effort to decide to eat a piece. These continual decisions are based on how we feel and are driven largely by our limbic system.

So it comes as no surprise that the small decisions are made subconsciously. What about the big ones? Well, those are also made primarily based on how we feel, and then supported by logic. When you are looking to buy a home, you

have your ideal suburb, your perfect garden and your number of bedrooms on your list of requirements. But it shouldn't surprise you when you find your "perfect" home with one less bedroom than you wanted, a bigger garden than you can maintain and two suburbs out of your ideal area. You hear yourself say "But it has a studio out the back so we can use that as a guest bedroom, and I can always hire a gardener, and this suburb is better anyway because the growth is yet to come". Sound familiar? Choosing a romantic partner happens in much the same way, with some of us rationalising more than others!

With so much subconscious influence, how do we take charge of our decision making so that we can increase the chances of making the choice that's right for us? Here are some suggestions.

1. Acknowledge that you feel with your head.

Sorry to dash the romantic illusion, but your heart just pumps blood! Decisions based on emotion are still made with your brain and should be respected. In fact, our limbic system draws on our memory and stored knowledge, when forming a "gut feeling" about choices. Pay attention to how you feel about the alternatives in a decision. Even if you can't explain why, your feelings often stem from experience.

2. Limit your alternatives.

Research demonstrates that when there are three or more alternatives, we make poorer decisions. Our brains cope best with two alternatives, so if there is a decision involving more than two options, narrow it down before making your final choice.

3. Ensure the options are clearly differentiated.

If we feel the choices are too similar or there is no clear advantage either way, this creates anxiety. We may find ourselves paralysed by indecision. This was evidenced by the widespread voter uncertainty during the recent federal election and was reflected in the subsequent result.

4. Be guided by your values.

When you are consciously in touch with your values, decision making becomes easier and more harmonious.

Identify what you truly value in life and utilise that information as a filter. It will help you sift out the most appropriate alternatives to consider, and you will find your subconscious and conscious minds meeting in agreement.

5. Create a story.

The emotional centre of our brain, the limbic system, has no capacity for language. In other words, language alone does not convert to emotion. To engage the limbic system more consciously, you need to create a story, paint a mind picture or demonstrate a future to which you can relate. This will help you see your choice more clearly based on your image of the future. This strategy can also help you influence others in their decision making process.

When it comes to decision making, it helps to acknowledge the roles of the different parts of your brain. That

way, you can utilise all your brain functions in the right way, to make the right decision at the right time, for you. 💡

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e: info@successfulminds.com.au
w: www.successfulminds.com.au
