

Ep #211 : Making Decisions When You're Stuck in Analysis Paralysis



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Ep #211 : Making Decisions When You're Stuck in Analysis Paralysis

Today's episode delves into decisions, decision block, the difficulty with making decisions, and how we can stop floundering with analysis paralysis, second-guessing, and worrying about making the wrong move. Ready to say goodbye to taking forever to make decisions? Let's dive in.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, I'm Kristi Angevine, a physician, Master Certified Coach, Internal Family Systems informed practitioner, and host of this podcast, where we explore the deeper psychology behind why we do what we do.

Hello, hello. One of the things that I realize that I've gotten so much better at is making decisions. One of my specialties in the past was analysis paralysis and these excruciatingly long decision-making processes. And while this didn't necessarily show up in every area of my life, when it did show up, the decision block was massive, and I had just internal stress that was out the roof. So what I've realized that's been a paradigm shift for me is this.

When it comes to decisions, there's actually no right decision. There are just neutral decisions about which I have thoughts. And thus there are decisions that I choose to make right. And I'm going to explain what it means to make a decision right. And I'm going to elaborate on the single obstacle that makes decision-making so difficult for highly thoughtful overthinkers. And then I'm going to give you a really practical technique to help you be more decisive.

So if you are new to the podcast, welcome. We are going to dive straight into something that is a really great topic to discuss, as well as give you something practical that you can apply this week. When it comes to changing habits, we have to have awareness about the habit itself, awareness about the pattern, be mindful of when it's happening, but then we have to be able to bridge the gap between theoretic and intellectual understanding of things and actually apply what we know into our real everyday life. So that's what this podcast is going to do. I'm going to give

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you an overview and then give you something you can really sink your teeth into.

And if this is your first episode, I'm so glad you're here, and I recommend that you go back and listen to some of the earlier episodes, whether you start at number one and do those foundational ones, episodes one through 10, or you just kind of pick and choose, doesn't really matter, but I welcome you to go back and listen to some of the other episodes so you can get a really sturdy foundation for talking about habit change.

All right, so let's dive into decisions. The single most problematic obstacle to being decisive is believing that there's only one right decision. Believing that there's one good, ideal, perfect way to do things and that anything besides this one correct way is bad and wrong. This is black and white all-or-none thinking at its most torturous. This is the underbelly of perfectionism.

So is this you? Do you notice a part of you clutches to the belief that there is a right decision? Well, if so, I want to systematically unpack this idea so that you can really clearly see the painful ramifications, and then we can work on changing it.

So if you start with the premise that there is one right decision, aka, one right way to do things, one correct way to go for your goal, one right way to start a project, this means that anything other than that single right decision is the wrong decision. Now, internally, this might innocently sound something like thinking, I just need to get this right. I want to make the best choice. I wonder what's going to work out best. What makes decisions troublesome is in many situations, we can't actually know if a decision is going to be good or bad, useful or terrible until well after we have made the decision.

Now, if you're in traffic and you're trying to get somewhere at a certain time and you run into a big block of traffic and you have to decide, do I go left or do I go right to gamble on a shortcut to actually get to where I want to go on

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time? Sure. The decision to go left or the decision to go right, one of them might be quicker than the other, and you might find that out pretty quickly. Or if you're dealing with some sort of emergency, deciding, do I start this medicine or that medicine? Do I call for a CT? Do I do a surgery? What intervention do I do, this one or that one? Indeed, these types of things can have a very clear-cut, quickly discoverable consequence.

But for a lot of our everyday decisions or big life decisions, we quite literally cannot fully know the consequences of the decision until a while after it's made. The kind of decisions that I'm talking about here are the ones that are less immediately concrete in their results. Deciding, should I take this job? Should I take that job? Should I get a dog? Should I not get a dog? Do I freeze my eggs? Do I adopt? Do I start a podcast? Do I not start a podcast? Should I get my masters or should I just do a self-study program? Do I initiate this hard conversation with my sister-in-law, or do I let the whole issue drop? Which refrigerator do I buy? Should I run or go to spin class? Should I get up early? Should I press snooze? Who do I talk to first, my boss or my colleague? Do I go part-time, or do I go all in on more work?

Since with these types of decisions, we can't actually know what's going to work out best until afterwards, from the premise that there's a right decision and a wrong decision, a self-imposed hell emerges. Now, so that you can really understand what I'm talking about, I want to flesh out what it really looks like when you have a deeply ingrained belief that there are right decisions and wrong decisions. Listen and see where you can relate to this in your life. When you believe there's one right decision, you get what I call decision block. Decision block is a bit like writer's block. If your decision needs to be the right one, you feel pressure. You might mentally, emotionally freeze because you run the risk of making the wrong decision and that signals doom in all caps.

So you decide nothing, which is its own decision. This is analysis paralysis at its finest. It's hemming and hawing, overthinking, decisions take forever, extensive research precedes any forward action or decision. You create endless pros and cons lists because you can't risk the wrong decision. You

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need to know everything before you act. You research, you explore, you get in the weeds of minutia. Should you use this font or that font? This color palette or that one? What about this format? What about that wallpaper?

You vacillate back and forth and this is so exhausting. It sounds like, if I do this, then I'm going to have to deal with that. But if I do that, I might miss out on this. When this goes on and on, you end up missing the present moment as you imagine a bleak future where you made the wrong decision, where you made the wrong choice and you are riddled with regret.

When you believe there's one right decision, you procrastinate. Starting comes with a ton of pressure to do it, so you put off deciding and you kick that can down the road because maybe later you'll have more clarity. Believing that there's one correct best decision can also fuel chronic crowd-sourcing and chronic comparison with others. What have other people done? What do other people think? Maybe I should ask so-and-so what they would do.

Now, let it be said that to a certain degree, doing some inquiry with other people who've been there, done that can be really practical and really useful, especially when you're doing it in a strategic way to educate yourself. But when this is done from the mindset of all or one, aka, there's only one right decision, there's a compulsive nature to it that ultimately delays your decision and leaves you basically not even sure what you think.

So believing that there's one correct decision, one right way to do things, fosters decision block, analysis paralysis, procrastination, comparison, and frankly, outsourcing your own ability to make decisions. And all this makes sense. When there's one singular right decision and just one decision, you run the risk of picking the wrong path and the wrong choice, making the wrong decision. So of course, in your mind, you think that you'd better do everything you can to prevent that.

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So let's take a moment to take a little side trip and just ask, what actually is really so bad about making a so-called wrong decision? Now, as some of you hear this, you might be objecting, well, with my job, my wrong decision could harm somebody. My wrong decision while driving could cause an accident. My wrong decision while doing a surgery really could cause long-lasting harm. And I want to validate the fact that there are certain decisions in urgent, emergent, or high-stake scenarios that really genuinely do carry immediate life or death consequences.

But in most non-life-or-death scenarios, the bad part about a decision that you make and then later don't like is how you're going to feel. Let me say that again to be really clear. The bad part about a decision that you make and then later on do not like is how you're going to feel in the aftermath of that decision. Why will you potentially feel badly after making a choice you don't like? You'll only feel badly because you tell yourself something along the lines of, I should have known better. I messed up and that means I suck. I don't know how I'm going to get out of this. I don't know why I keep getting myself into this. What is my problem? Other people would have been able to do so much better.

When you make a decision that has consequences that you don't like, the alternative way of thinking about this could sound like, well, damn, this is not what I was hoping for. Or, I'm either winning or I'm learning. So now that I know what I know, what are we going to do? But if you tell yourself things like, I should have known better, this is all my fault, I suck, and you conclude that you're a terrible, broken, defective human, you will predictably feel awful. And when this is your pattern, in the aftermath of things not going how you want, it just adds an extra layer of suffering that reinforces why you better make the right decision. And in this way, analysis paralysis keeps you safe from your own self-judgment and regret.

But what if we turn this whole thing on its head? And what if there actually wasn't a single right decision in the first place? What if that didn't even exist? What if there wasn't just one correct choice? What if the idea of a single right decision was just a romanticized Hollywood construct? If there

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isn't one right decision, there's less risk or pressure because instead of right or wrong, there are just decisions, neutral decisions, decisions about which you have thoughts and feelings.

And since we have agency with what we choose to think, and since we have agency with the narratives that we choose to tell ourselves about the decisions we make, the decisions need not be so weighty. So here's the antidote that I propose to analysis paralysis, decision block, overthinking, procrastination, and second-guessing. Remember this one thing: There is not a right choice or a right decision. There is simply the decision or choice that you make right.

So let's get really concrete with an example, so this makes good sense. Say you're trying to decide what to do on vacation. You want the vacation to be really fun, really relaxing, so great for everyone involved. And you're trying to figure out where to go and what to do. Now, you can't know in advance what the weather's going to be like, how your flight's going to go, what everybody's mood's going to be like. You can't know all the travel wrinkles that are guaranteed to come up. You can't know what's going to be fun, what's going to be hard.

But when you start this process off with the belief that there is one right vacation, you're going to extensively research, make lots of lists. You're going to ask your friends, spend lots of time passively wondering, how's it going to go? What should we do? What about this? You might forecast different vacations in your mind's eye. And then when you can't decide between all these options you've generated, you'll start asking around. Then you'll gather even more data, which will make it even easier to push that decision off until later, because maybe later you'll know more and have clarity. Maybe clarity will just descend from the heavens and you'll know exactly what to do next week.

So with the idea in the back of your mind that there's one right vacation, you hem and you haw, and you wonder, and you worry, and you imagine what could go wrong and what you might miss out on if you pick one versus

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the other, and it takes months to decide. And then it's decision time, and you scramble to force yourself to pick quickly before the hotel is not available, before the flights are expensive. But then you and your lovely brain keep doing what you've been doing. You second-guess, what if this isn't the right one? You picture it going poorly. You picture feeling awful. Everybody griping at one another. Everybody hating your decision, people judging what you chose, all because deep down, you believe there's one correct, right decision.

Now, let's contrast this to a totally different scenario where you believe that there's not one decision that will make or break a vacation, but rather, there's a vacation that you can choose and then you can make that vacation choice into the right vacation choice for you. When you come out vacation planning from this perspective, you can calendar a finite time in which you'll decide. And then you can do some research. You can scroll the internet, you can poll all of your family, crunch some financial numbers. And then you give yourself a few days and then you pick where you're going to go because you know you're going to make this decision into the right one. And you know that you're not going to be doomed to a lifetime of anguish if and when things aren't perfect.

So in this case, there's no need to imagine and mentally try to avoid all the worst-case scenarios. And when there's not a right or wrong decision, it's so much easier to trust your instincts and decide what to do without so much mental drama.

So let me reinforce and be really clear with this one thing. With most of our decisions, we cannot know the outcome of that decision until after we've made the decision. But when we tell ourselves that there's a correct one, a correct decision and that we must figure it out in advance, we put ourselves in a bind. It's like perfectionism meets magical thinking and the criteria for the right decision is that nothing goes wrong and that we have no regret, even when we have no data and we cannot have data in advance that will help us actually decipher between quote right and quote wrong. And this is the hallmark of decision block as a personal hell.

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Let's take another example: trying to figure out where your kids should go to school. Now, if you've got kids, this will make sense. If you don't have kids, just apply all of this to deciding where you might go to school, deciding which program you might do. So, for the parents listening, regardless of age, this decision about where your kids should go to school, this is often one that tortures so many parents. Should they do private or public or traditional or non-traditional or homeschool or in-district or out of district? Should you unschool your kids? Should they go with their friends or towards academics? Should they pick the program with the sports? How to pick the right one?

From the premise that there is one right school and all of the rest of them are not as good, there's a baked-in pressure to figure out the difference. Yet until your kid's actually in school, you're not going to know. Was it a good fit? Would a different school have been a better fit? So if you start the process thinking there is a right decision and there is one right decision, this is what often happens. You do some preliminary research, but you're still ravenous for more information. And you don't just ask a handful of people their experiences, you ask tons of people, anybody you can get your hand on. What do you think about the school? What was your experience? What have you heard? You might make spreadsheets with pros and cons for each.

In the back of your mind, you're constantly thinking about it. You imagine the perfect school experience. And this fantasy stands in abject contrast to the wrong decisions that are looming, waiting to clobber you and make you and your kid miserable. You picture your kid getting bullied or lagging behind academically or not having the emotional support they need or having to change schools and hating you for the school that you chose and regretting the decision. You might flash forward to a time in their 20s and 30s where their entire personality, their job choice, their happiness, and all of their relationships are negatively affected by the school that you chose. Cue the guilt, cue the pressure.

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So you ask more questions, you wonder more, and you get no closer to a decision. And even when you do make a decision, it doesn't feel very sturdy. It's like this wobbly house of cards, and you're left with a part of you desperately hoping it's going to be okay, but worried it's not.

Versus, when you start the school search with the premise that you know there are going to be different experiences at different schools, each with pros and cons, none of which you can know in advance, you approach the choice with some ease. If you believe there's not a right school, but a school that you and your kid will make the best of, and you believe that you'll figure it out as you go along, you can make a thoughtful decision without it taking an excessive amount of time, less hemming and hawing, because you don't get bogged down in the bleak worst-case scenarios. And you just know your kid's going to learn a ton, no matter what happens. You're going to make the best of what you face, even if there are some missteps, fails, and things that you wish you'd done differently.

Even in the so-called worst-case scenario, you're going to deal with that too. And when you do this, you can more easily see the good and see the neutral in all of your options. And it's easier to use your instincts, your intuition, and trust that you're going to be able to handle whatever the consequences are.

See the difference between these? The difference here is, there's one right school and if we don't pick right, we're doomed. Or, there are school experiences that have different flavors and we're going to make the best of all of them because we trust ourselves to figure it out.

When you start off making a decision from the place of there aren't right decisions, but there are decisions that we will make right, this is how you open the door to making faster decisions. Fast, intuition-driven decisions are not hasty, but they're fueled by clarity and self-trust and a willingness to experiment. When you do this, you open the door to resourcefulness in the face of whatever comes. In Internal Family System terms, you are

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facilitating access to self with a capital S with all the authentic wisdom and sturdiness that comes with it.

Now, before I referenced that decision block is akin to the straitjacket freeze of writer's block. One technique to get out of writer's block is to commit to a bad first draft. You basically just commit to starting writing, and you give yourself a timeline in which you must finish. And you expect that the writing that you're doing is going to be imperfect.

Similarly, when it comes to making a decision, when you realize that there is not actually one right decision to make, it's like giving yourself permission to do a bad first draft. You shift from a mindset of this decision has to be the right one to this decision moves me forward one step. So it's not a risk for a lifetime of regret and suffering. It's just, just like a bad first draft, I give myself permission to make a decision that feels right at the time.

So to recap, when you consciously or subconsciously hold the belief that there is one right decision, this is a recipe for decision block, confusion, perfectionistic analysis paralysis, and fear of regret. In contrast, when you set that idea aside, and you believe that there are no right or wrong decisions, but there are decisions that you make right, that you make work for you, no matter the consequences, you free yourself. You make faster decisions from a confident, calm, clear headspace.

But let's touch base on something. What if you make a decision and later on you look back and think, if I knew then what I know now, I would totally have made a different decision? Does that then make your old decision the wrong one? If you believe in right and wrong decisions, then yes, which will possibly lead you to a cascade of discontent about the past and a present-day feeling of precariousness where you don't trust yourself to make a decision in the face of not ever having all the information because gosh forbid, you make a decision and later on you learn more and you look back and say, I wouldn't have made that same decision. This way of thinking simply serves to make you wrong all of the time.

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And what I find to be a more useful way of looking at things is choosing the narrative that the decision that you made in the past was the best decision based on what you knew at the time, which honestly is the best we can ever do. So how do you know if you are plagued by the idea that there is one right decision, one right way of doing things?

Well, ask yourself this: How easy is it for you to make big decisions? How easy is it for you to make small decisions? If they are really hard, you probably harbor some sort of version of a deep belief that there's a right choice and a wrong choice, a tendency to beat yourself up when things don't go as planned.

So if you have analysis paralysis, second-guessing, comparison, and crowd-sourcing as some of the patterns surrounding making decisions, I have a practical way for you to start changing this. First thing, ask yourself this: If I knew there wasn't one right choice or one right decision, if I just knew there was a decision that I was going to make right, if I trusted myself completely to handle whatever came up, what decisions would I make right now? I want you to get your computer or your phone or a sheet of paper and answer that. If I trusted myself completely, if I knew there wasn't one right choice, what decisions would I make right now? And make a list. What are all the things that you would just decide to do?

Once you have this list, which might be really long or it might be two or three things that have been really nagging at you, your next step is to learn what's in the way of executing on these decisions. The way you understand what's in the way of confidently making a decision in the face of the unknowns is you check in and see, how do I feel about each of these decisions? Look at your list and with each decision you wrote down, ask yourself, how do I feel? What emotions are coming up for me? Tune into any angst or objections.

And I want you to listen in like you're a journalist interviewing someone for a story. Listen with curiosity and compassion, and listen to all the parts of you that show up that have a bunch of opinions about the decision. Maybe

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you have a Chicken Little part that's like, oh me, oh my, oh if we do that, then all these terrible things could happen, and then this could happen and that could happen and, oh my gosh, what are we going to do? Maybe you have a pessimistic cynic that says, well, if you choose that, it'll probably go sideways and it's going to show everybody that you're a fraud and everyone's finally going to see how incompetent you are and you're going to regret it forever. Maybe you hear a part that worries about what other people will think of your decision.

Whatever you discover, just take some notes about the objections. The objections are coming from the different parts of your psyche that are uncomfortable with executing on a decision. And many of these parts hold inside the idea that there's a right and a wrong decision. Now, conventional advice around this negative inner self-talk is to find a way to tell these voices that they are wrong, to sort of pick apart or invalidate their objections, to persuade them to be really quiet or just make them go away.

I'm going to tell you something that I think is so much more effective, because when you try to quiet or invalidate or make go away inner parts, it basically exiles or temporarily banishes these concerns. It's kind of like sending a grouchy relative to your back porch when company comes over. You temporarily push something to the side, but you don't actually deal with it head on.

So instead, the deeper, i.e., more effective work is to get really curious. How come these objections are here? What concerns do they reveal? How do these objections make sense based on what you've experienced in your life? How does the Chicken Little part make sense based on what you've gone through? If your decision has to do with something professional, do you have similar parts that show up in other areas of your life?

Taking time to get to know these different parts is essential. So get to know the concerns and fears and worries, not with an agenda to change things or figure things out and fix and silence and exile them, but simply with a goal to really understand these parts that come up as objections. Doing this

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helps you better understand why you may feel uncomfortable or torn about making decisions. And then, once you're armed with this better understanding, you can still make a swift choice and execute on it while you simultaneously tend to the parts of you that need tending to.

And what this looks like is practicing kind self-talk. It sounds like this. On your list, you see a decision you're going to make. You go make that decision. And then when you feel uncomfortable, you remind yourself, of course, once I picked this thing, I'm worried I'm going to regret it later. I worry because I care, and you know, I can't know the best choice in advance, but a part of me wishes I could. It makes a lot of sense I would worry. And when a part of me believes there's a right and a wrong choice, and that my choice comes with irreparable consequences, no wonder this feels uncomfortable to commit.

And what you're doing by talking to yourself in this really kind, compassionate way is you are addressing concerns instead of sort of whitewashing them or making them go away into the recesses of your mind. And you are simultaneously being decisive.

So if you knew there were no right decisions, what would you decide? If you trusted yourself completely to handle whatever comes up, what decisions would you make right now? How do you feel about these decisions? What concerns and fears and worries do these feelings about these decisions reveal? Doing this will guide you to the inner work that you need to do, concurrent with being more decisive. And then when you're armed with this knowledge, you can still make decisions, execute on them, and then kindly tend to the inner concerns and fears that you have.

So if you struggle to make decisions, you might do this because you've internalized this socially constructed idea that there's a right and a wrong decision to all the things. When we operate from this premise, all we do is cause ourselves to struggle when we make decisions. The truth is, there's not a right choice or right decision. There are just the decisions that you choose to make right. And when you shift to this belief, this is how you stop

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decision block and how you stop analysis paralysis. It's how you untangle the underbelly of all-or-none perfectionistic thinking.

So this week, I want you to remind yourself, there's not a right or wrong decision. There's simply the decision that you choose to make right. I hope this was valuable for you, and if you have any questions, please come join the email list. Go to habitsonpurpose.com and you'll see a little link that says join the email list, and when you join and you get your emails, you can press reply to any email. Talk to you next week.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit HabitsOnPurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.