10 Tips for Making Good Decisions...

Without *Stressing* Out!

By Mitch Axelrod

Making decisions is the most frequent activity in which we engage. We do it every day of our lives.

There is no manual for this most vital life skill. Unfortunately, most of us learn decision-making by trial and error. As Aristotle said, "*For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them*." We learn to make decisions by the act of making decisions.

Like the involuntary systems in our body, much of our thinking goes on behind the scenes, and our decision-making occurs beneath the surface, often without our conscious awareness. The word "decide" comes from the same Latin root as the word, homicide: *caedere*, meaning, "to kill or cut."

When we decide, we literally "kill or cut off" options and alternatives until we leave ourselves just one. The problem is that we really never know if the one we're left with is the best one, nor do we know if one of those we "killed off" wouldn't have been better. Deciding actually "kills off" our ability to choose. To compound the matter, we can't know until after the fact if our decision will work. All too often, once we decide on "the" option, we tend to stay with it, even if it doesn't work.

How many times have you made a decision that doesn't work, but you don't change it, or choose again because you feel compelled to stick with it? Why?

It's because you've "killed off" the other alternatives, and left yourself backed into a corner. Could it also be that you are afraid of looking bad, appearing foolish, being wrong, facing criticism and hearing ridicule? Do you find yourself defending, protecting and justifying a decision that no longer works for you - and likely, one that no longer works for those who are affected by it? Being stubborn, prideful, resistant, defensive and resentful doesn't make us happy, satisfied and fulfilled. But it does make us RIGHT, and somewhere along the line we were taught to place a high value on being right.

For some people, being right is so important that they'd rather be right than happy. You've heard the story of the guy driving on the right side of the road, and there's a Mack truck coming right at him? He won't swerve to get out of the way, because he is right. He winds up "dead" right. Is there a Mack truck in your life?

Did you raise your hand in school if you had any old answer, or did you raise your hand only when you thought you had the RIGHT answer? We can waste years, sometimes a lifetime, standing for being right, rather than standing for being happy and fulfilled. Families battle and nations fight over who is right and wrong, while the body counts mount and the casualties rise. Even when we know life is not working the way we want it to work, we stay with our decisions for fear of admitting we might have made a "wrong" choice. How sad, and, how very human.

If you are ready to create a whole new world of possibility and live a life you love, this mini-course will guide you.

Here are 10 tips for making good decisions without stressing out.

1- Consider new language.

As we said, the word decide comes from the Latin roots, "*de"* (off) and "*caedere*" (to kill or cut). When we "decide" we literally "kill or cut off" choices or alternatives, until we leave ourselves with just one. This process of elimination is a source of stress and anxiety, and creates uncertainty about whether we are selecting the best remaining option. Sometimes, it appears our alternatives come down to the "lesser of two evils" or the best of what's left.

Consider this linguistic shift: make "choices" rather than decisions. Decisions are heavy, weighted down with the pressure of being right, not looking bad or making a "wrong" decision. A decision opens us up to criticism, ridicule and second-guessing by others, and the all too frequent practice of self-criticism and regret. Decisions can be so pressure-packed they can cause us to shut down, paralyzed by the thought (fear) of the possible consequences, ramifications and implications of "what if" it doesn't work out.

Trying to avoid mistakes, we try to eliminate all the possible "wrong" answers to find what we believe will be the "right" answer. If it doesn't work out, we look back and say something like, "I had no choice." Of course not. You killed them off. This can make life miserable.

Because of pride or the unwillingness to accept we might have been mistaken, we tend to hang on to our decisions long after they are no longer

working. We feel bad and make ourselves wrong, which disempowers us. If we're stuck, attached to, or vested in the first decision, and we cut off options and alternatives, it's hard to go back and re-consider a choice from the original options. We've cut them off.

Instead, CHOOSE. Choosing causes us to take responsibility, and doesn't cut off or eliminate any options, alternatives or possibilities. We can always choose again. This simple linguistic shift will alter your life forever.

Every moment, you have the power to choose. What will you choose right now? Right now? Right now?

2- Recognize, understand and acknowledge HOW you currently make decisions.

What do you pay attention to, and what do you overlook? What do you see and what do you miss? Everyone has blind spots. Imagine what it would be like to drive your car without mirrors. You would only be able to see what's in front of you. You'd miss everything to the right, left, and behind. You'd be scared to death to take your eyes off the road, for fear the split second you turned your head you might crash into something. If your eyes are fixed straight ahead, you cannot know what's off to each side. Even with mirrors, there is still at least ONE blind spot that requires you to turn your head to see, or ask your passenger if she can see where you can't. This is how many people live their lives, seeing only what's right in front of them. This limits your sight, and your options.

To the degree you are willing to admit and accept you have blind spots, and ask for assistance and support to see what you can't, is the degree to which you'll reduce and eliminate much of the stress associated with making choices that work. Open up to how you think and make choices.

What are you missing, the appearance of which could alter your next important decision? If you could see what you can't see, how would it impact the quality of your life?

3- Appreciate that every decision is made with missing information.

You can never have ALL the necessary information to make a "perfect" decision. You know what you know, and you know what you don't know. It's WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW that gets in the way of making good choices. Because we all have blind spots, we simply cannot see all facets of a situation, nor can we ever have all the information we need to be certain that our choice will work out. Are you willing to open up your mind and your heart to finding out what you don't know you don't know?

Imagine this. You and your friends are sitting around a table, and in the middle is a globe of the world. The question is, "How much of the world is water?" What's your answer? It depends on where you're sitting, and what you see. If you're looking at the Pacific Ocean and the Hawaiian Islands, the world appears to be 90% water. If you are looking at the continent of Asia, your answer might be 10% of the world is water. Which answer is the "right" answer?

In this game, it's pretty easy to see that both, AND neither, are right. It's fairly obvious that your answer is based on your view, or perception of the globe. You see one slice of the world, your slice, and in order to see more of it, you would have to get up and sit in the other chairs. To see it from all points of view, or to get the "whole of it" you'd have to sit in every chair and see it from every angle.

This is a simple exercise and a powerful way to demonstrate how our view of life is limited to what we see and perceive. Regardless of how "complete" our view, what we see is only a small slice of all there is. Do you know people who refuse to see another view, or argue that their view of the world is not only the right view of the world, but the ENTIRE view of the world? How limiting is this?

There is real value is seeing how much of our lives we live, believing our view is the ONLY view, our perception is the RIGHT perception, or that what we see is ALL there is. Sitting in another person's chair would not only help you see the other view, it actually expands your view. Accepting another perspective doesn't invalidate ours, but rather enlarges our view and opens up new possibilities. IF we could sit in everybody's chair (walk in their shoes, see through their eyes), we'd get into their worlds. It would create a much bigger picture of what's available and possible for us, rather than being limited only to our view. If everybody could actually live one day inside another human being, all the disagreements, hurtfulness, violence, war, fear, pain and suffering on the planet would be understood - and they would all begin to disappear in that instant.

To see more of the world, make choosing a fun game, rather than a stressful event. Where in your life can you open up to expanding your view of the world (and yourself), which would serve you better in living a fulfilled and satisfied life?

4- Recognize and be with your fear.

EVERYBODY IS AFRAID, and everybody is pretending not to be. How funny. The toughest among us put on a good front, but below the surface we all

have a fear of something or someone. Welcome to being human. We invest a lot of time and energy, and waste far too much of life, pretending we're not afraid. We try to appear strong, avoid looking bad, being vulnerable, wanting to be liked, approved of, and accepted. We don't want to be embarrassed, found out, taken advantage of, or dominated, feel regret, and the list goes on. We all have a list. They are all different, and yet, all the same. The common denominator is fear.

It's said babies are born with only two fears: falling and loud noises. Every other fear is learned or conditioned. We are told early on in life, "Don't be afraid." Or, "Don't cry" (especially boys because, "boys don't cry"). From that moment on and forever, we are afraid, and, afraid to cry. This well-meaning but misguided advice denies reality, and sets us up for the rest of our lives to let fear run us. We make ourselves wrong for being afraid, and weak if we show it. We go underground and suppress our fear. Whatever we suppress, controls us. What we resist, persists.

We create the pretense that we're not afraid when we're scared out of our minds. As we grow up, fear causes us to hesitate, delay, and procrastinate. In an effort not to expose our fear, we deceive ourselves and others, and deny the truth. It's very human to be afraid. It's in us, and serves as a survival mechanism, as well as a warning signal for real danger. The problem is, we've lost our ability to distinguish imagined danger from REAL danger. The whole world seems dangerous. The funny thing is that everyone seems to be afraid of everyone else. The other 6.3 billion people are just as afraid of you, as you are of them.

In this context, we can start to see how the whole human race is walking around afraid, and pretending not to be. If you can you laugh about this, it's a good sign. If you stop and think about what we're really afraid of, much of it never happens, some of it we can't do anything about, and the rest of it isn't as bad as we imagined it to be. It's helpful to actually say, "I'm afraid of" and complete the sentence. I'm afraid of looking bad, appearing foolish, saying something stupid, being wrong, failing, succeeding (many people fear success as much or more than they fear failure), losing friends and prestige, taking a stand, or whatever it is you fear. Fear is so prevalent in our culture, it impacts our every aspect of life, effecting our peace of mind and physical well-being.

What are you afraid of? Put it out there. Let people know you are afraid. Just expressing it releases some of the fear and worry, and when examined under the light of reality, fears tend to diminish. Pretending we're not afraid is a lie, and that lie is literally killing us - in all kinds of ways. On top of it all, we're afraid of being afraid. Fear is a big contributor to being stressed out. Share your fear with someone you trust (or even a total stranger).

Which fear is in your way of making an important decision? Is fear inhibiting you from living a full life? As the popular book title suggests, FEEL THE FEAR AND DO IT ANYWAY. FEEL THE FEAR AND CHOOSE YOUR LIFE ANYWAY.

5- Accept that with choice, comes risk.

Life is risky. It's virtually impossible to eliminate all the risk associated with making choices. Webster's defines risk as "danger, the possibility of suffering harm or loss." This explains why risk is one of our greatest fears. Fear and risk are blood brothers. We fear the risks associated with life. We're taught to "be careful" and "watch out" for danger. Yet, much of the juice in life is where the risk is. Why do so many people love scary movies?

Trying to eliminate or minimize risk is playing the game of life "not to lose" rather than living to win. I'm not advocating jumping off the Empire State Building. But many of the every day risks are far more risky in our minds than in reality. Think back to the first school dance, with the boys on one side and the girls on the other. Or, the first time you asked someone for a date, or were asked out on a date. Is there a more emotionally paralyzing fear or heart-palpatating risk than the risk of rejection? What is rejection? It's simply someone saying no. Rejection is a made up fear, a scary story we tell ourselves so often that we frighten ourselves. But it is very real for most of us, and grips us so tightly that is can create physical illness, and reduce our mental well-being.

To the degree you get comfortable with accepting life is inherently risky, you will ease the pressure, stress and strain of making choices. Ask yourself, "Is my fear made up, or is there a real danger here? What's the worst that can happen here? Will it really harm me if I just accept the outcome? What would I do if I knew I could handle whatever happens?"

We make up stories about things that happen, and those stories run our lives. She said no (she "rejected"me), so asking for a date is risky. I didn't get the toy I wanted, so asking for what I want is risky. He criticized me for expressing myself, so speaking my mind is risky. She didn't agree with me, so taking a different point of view is risky. He didn't love me back, so loving is risky. He won't like me if I don't do what he wants, so doing what's best for me is risky. Creating opportunity and new possibility is risky, so I better not rock the boat. He didn't give me the promotion, so asking for a raise is out of the question. Living life my way is risky, so maybe I'll just take what comes, instead of creating what I want. I get the chills just reading those, and realizing how much of my life I've made up these stories.

The choice is ours to live in fear of risk, or in spite of it. What risk will you take today?

6- **Be willing to make, and accept your mistakes.**

Our best learning, understanding and growth come from our mistakes, not our successes. Success does teach us much, but mistakes teach us more. How many times did you fall down learning to walk? Did that stop you?

In the movies, when a scene doesn't work, the director yells, "CUT!" Then, he repositions the actors on the set and yells, "TAKE TWO!" The director doesn't give up after the first take. He acknowledges that it may require many "takes" to get the scene the way he wants it. How would your life be if you could look at every "choice"as just another "take" on life? If it doesn't work out, yell "Cut!" and do another "take." Life requires many "takes" to get it the way you want it, so why waste so much energy regretting the takes that don't work? Leave them on the cutting room floor.

Keep "taking" life on until you create the life you want. Acknowledge mistakes. Make it a game. "Oops, I goofed!" It's very human to make mistakes. You can't swing and miss the ball if you're not in the batter's box. Hiding mistakes is also human, and very draining. We gain energy when we just come right out and say, "I made a mistake." Be the first to declare your mistakes. Be proud of your mistakes. It means you're on the field, participating in the game of life. You'll have plenty of time to make no mistakes when they throw the dirt in your face or cast your ashes upon the waters.

In the meantime, "Take two!" What part of your life would you like to take again?

7- **Let go of your judgments about yourself and others.**

In the background of life is our operating system, but in the foreground of the operating system is where we judge and evaluate (more like critique) the decisions and choices we make. It's tough enough to live in a world where people are judging us. There is no shortage of critics in the world. We don't need to add the weight of our own judgments to our life, yet, our minds are constantly chattering, judging.

Most judgment is not constructive, but critical and destructive. As we see with objective clarity how we think, why we think the way we do, what we value and pay attention to, and maybe most important of all, what we miss (blind spots), we understand and have power over our thinking and decision-making processes. When we eliminate judging, we open the door to

acceptance, forgiveness and new choices. The person you have to accept and forgive first and foremost is who? You got it. YOU!

Release your judgments, accept your choices (and those of others) and forgive yourself (and others) for EVERYTHING. Then watch the world transform beforeyour eyes.

8- Find people who will support and empower your choices.

Are you an "I'll do it myself" kind of person? I spent far too much of my life being supportive of others, yet not being supportable by others. Give up the notion that doing it yourself makes you strong. It just makes you alone. Be supportable.

This is an inter-dependent world. If you try to do it yourself, you're missing the experience of cooperation and collaboration, and you withhold from others the joy of supporting you. It took me nearly 45 years to let go of that mistaken idea, which has cost me dearly. You can't be honestly supportive without being truly supportable. They are two sides of the same coin.

Be willing to say, "I need help," or "I value your support," or "I'd like your perspective," or "I made a mistake," or "I'm scared and confused," or "I feel like I'm off course," or "What would you do if you were in my shoes?" or any other question or statement that enlists another person's support. Let people into your world, especially those who love you. This is not easy for those of us who were weaned on the idea that you keep things to yourself, and handle life by yourself.

It's generous to be vulnerable and open up to others. It's humble and healthy to accept help, and admit you do not have all the answers. Get rid of the need to be "strong" or right, and to go it alone. Make the choice - be unconditionally supportive and supportable. Start today.

Who will you support unconditionally? Who will you allow to support you, unconditionally? Call those people right now. You'll make their day, and yours.

9- Invest time in being and doing what matters most.

In Richard Bach's wonderful book, ONE, he says, "You gave up your life to be the person you are today. Was it worth it?" How many of your choices are made by default, not by design? How often do you react to life, rather than respond?

We invest so much time thinking about what we "ought" to be, "have" to do, or "got"to have, that we lose touch with WHO WE REALLY ARE and what we are HERE TO DO. We hardly notice the programs running our lives. They are deeply grooved, and silent, running like background muzak in an elevator. We make decisions like our hearts pump blood - involuntarily.

Choice is not involuntary. Choice is conscious. Decision-making is one of the most challenging things in the world to do because of all the stuff that comes with it. When we make decisions, especially those that don't work out, the lament seems to be, "I had no choice." When you "have no choice" you allow the circumstances to rule. In some way, and at some time, WE HAVE ALL BEEN IRRESPONSIBLE. That's also human. But it's past - it's over and done with. Put it behind and let it go.

CHOICE is responsibility. CHOICE is freedom. When we choose, we create possibility and space to live life. Decisions are hard. Choices are easy. Our considerations and reasons WHY, or WHY NOT cause us to lose touch with what really matters most to us.

If you want to be happy and have life work, CHOOSE it. Choose your choices. If they work, they work. If they don't, make another choice. "TAKE TWO." In a free society, you have freedom by birthright. The essence of freedom is the freedom to choose. Pretend there is no afterlife. This life is not a dress rehearsal. Choose it.

From this point on, make the CHOICE. Be who you are and do what matters most.

10- Consider the possibility that you are here to have a great life.

What would your life be like if you filled it with joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, success and love? Are you willing to accept that there are more choices than you can see? Absence of evidence is not evidence of something's absence.

You CAN live YOUR LIFE aligned with YOUR VALUES and UNIQUE GIFTS. Being authentically YOU is the highest and best way to live. You can be more fully alive, and live more fully in all areas of life. Open up to the possibility that you deserve it, are worthy of it, can be it, do it and have it.

Our thinking either limits life, or opens up possibilities. As Thoreau said, "most people live lives of quiet desperation," when we could be LIVING LA VIDA LOCA. We "kill off" possibility because we make decisions, rather than choices. We live inauthentic lives when we don't live in alignment with who we are and what we value.

One of the biggest fears I hear people express is the fear they will go to their graves with their music left in them. We have good excuses, great reasons, and all kinds of valid considerations for why we can't be, do and have the life we want. We can have excuses, reasons and considerations, or we can have life. In the end, we die anyway.

In the meantime, CHOOSE LIFE. Where you have been, whatever has come before, whatever is going on right now, is only prelude. Life is not inevitable, unless you think it is. It's a series of moment-to-moment choices. Start today.

Embrace the power you have to re-create your life, not from gotta, oughta, have to, or supposed to, but from CHOICE. Yes, life requires us to face the outcomes and results of our choices. The iron law of the universe is that cause yields effect. If you are trapped in a self-imposed prison of limited or NO CHOICE, all "decisions" will create stress, tension, worry and anxiety, and sap the life out of you. Decisions can feel like life or death, and from that frame of reference, our whole world can hinge on being right. Give that up. Being right leads to the "who stole my cheese" kind of life, and our attention shifts to finding fault and fixing blame on someone or something.

The difference between rats and humans is that humans continue going down the path with no cheese, steadfastly refusing to accept that there's no cheese. The choice isn't working, but we believe the cheese will magically appear, as long as we keep persisting. We wear our pride and persistence like a badge of honor.

Are you ready to have a great life? If so, give that up. I did. It was one of the most liberating days of my life. As uncomfortable as it may be to admit and confront this pattern of living, accepting response-ability for your choices frees and liberates you to live your life again, without the stress and tension of having to be right.

I'll ask you to make ONE MORE DECISION.

KILL OFF ALL OTHER OPTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES.
DECIDE TO LIVE YOUR LIFE IN THIS MOMENT.

CHOOSE LIFE. It will be the very best "decision" you ever made.