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206 — Friday Fix: How to Make Wise Decisions

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I’m Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I’m also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You’re listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Don’t forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let’s dive into today’s episode!

Today I’m talking about how to make a wise decision.

Why we’re never taught decision-making skills in school is beyond me. After all, your decisions affect every aspect of your life.

Some people certainly make better decisions than others. But everyone has the ability to learn how to make better decisions.

It’s a topic that we address in the therapy office quite often.

A lot of people who come into the office make jokes about the poor decisions they’ve made.
You’ve probably heard people make jokes too. If you look on social media, it won’t take long to find people who post things like, “My poor decisions make good stories,” or something like that.

But behind the jokes, there’s often a fair amount of pain. Bad decisions lead to heartache.

If you tend to make poor decisions, you know what I mean. You might struggle with shame, regret, sadness, and anxiety over past decisions. And you might lack confidence in your ability to make good decisions in the future—which can leave you feeling stuck.

Rather than feel empowered to make good choices that improve your life, you might end up just trying to avoid making things worse.

Or you might decide you’re doomed and give up trying to make good decisions and just do whatever feels the best right now.

The truth is, all of us make bad decisions sometimes. We date someone who isn’t right for us—and then stay in the relationship way too long. Or, we lose our temper and say something that ruins a friendship we’ve had for a long time. Or we take a job that we knew wasn’t a good fit because we liked the new title or we wanted the salary.

There are many reasons we make bad decisions—sometimes we don’t have enough information. How do you know if you’ll like a new job better if you’ve never worked at a particular company before?

At other times, our ego gets in the way. If you launched a business and you were losing money every month, you might find it’s hard to throw in the towel because you don’t want people to see the business failed. So, you might keep going month after month anyway in an attempt to spare your reputation.

There are also times when we cave to bad decisions but we’re looking for immediate gratification. After committing to a healthier lifestyle on Monday, you might find yourself opting to sit on the couch and watch TV while eating pizza and drinking beer by the end of the week.

But the biggest factor that goes into bad decisions is that our emotions and our logic are not in balance. This is why the issue becomes a common topic in therapy—we aren’t using what we call our wise mind. We get stuck in our emotional mind or our rational mind.
We make our best decisions when we use our wise mind—which is a balance between our emotions and rational thinking.

Think of it like a spectrum. Your rational mind is on one end, your emotional mind is on the other. You want to be in the middle when you make decisions—that means you take both logic and emotion into account.

But, often we make choices when those things are not in balance. It’s important to recognize that as your emotions go up, your logic goes down. And when your logic goes up, your emotions go down.

When you make a decision based on logic only, you don’t factor in how you’re going to feel. You might move across the country for a new job because it makes sense on paper without thinking about how much you’re going to miss your family or how much anxiety you’re going to have about living in a new place.

If you made every decision in life based on logical thinking only, you’d live an incredibly boring life. You wouldn’t do fun things, fall in love, or enjoy the people around you.

Emotions need to be a factor in your decisions—even your business decisions.

On the other hand, you can’t make good decisions based on emotion only. Otherwise, you’d only do the things you feel like doing. And how often do you feel like going to work, eating healthy, exercising, and taking care of yourself?

There’s also evidence that says as your emotions go up, your IQ goes down. If you took an IQ test when you felt really angry, you’d likely score a lot lower than if you took the test when you felt calm.

So if you’ve ever made an impulsive decision that in hindsight seems really out of character or quite ridiculous, it means you were using your emotional mind and you weren’t thinking clearly.

Most of us flip flop between the two extremes. We make some decisions based on logic only. Then, we might grow bored—and we make a decision based on emotion only. Then, we get tired of being impulsive or we get tired of the consequences and we snap back into logical decision making only.

Think for a minute about a time when you made a decision based on logic only. Like maybe you sat down and crunched some numbers and decided you should take a new job based on how much you get paid and you didn’t factor in whether it was a job you actually wanted. In your head, this job made sense. But that doesn’t mean it made sense to your heart.
Think about an example in your own life when you made a decision based on logic only.

Now, think about a time when you made a decision based on emotion only. Maybe you did something really wild, like you moved across the country for someone you’d only ever talked to online. Or maybe you quit a job because you were having a bad day.

Sometimes, our emotions that are either far too logical or far too emotional can work out.

But when they do, it’s often somewhat random and it causes us to lack confidence in our ability to make good decisions—so when things go wrong, we switch to the other mode and become too logical or too emotional in an attempt to compensate.

But we can learn to find the middle ground—something which is known as the ‘wise mind’ in DBT (or dialectical behavior therapy).

This means taking both our emotions and our logic into consideration so we can make better decisions.

Here are some strategies that can help:

Ask yourself if your emotions and logic are in balance. When you’re making a decision, pause and ask yourself how emotional you feel and how logical you feel. This can help you become more aware of how the scales are tipped in one way or the other.

If your emotions are running high, you can reduce the intensity of your emotions. There are a few ways to do this. You might take steps to reduce the intensity of an emotion. Briefly distracting yourself might be all you need to calm down so you can think more clearly.

When your emotions are running high, you can also raise your logic. This might involve sitting down and writing out a list of the pros and cons of the decision. Putting things on paper and reviewing the facts will help you get into your rational mind.

Now let’s look at the end of the spectrum. If you’re being too logical, raise your emotion. If you’re trying to make a decision based on what a spreadsheet says, pause and check in with yourself about how you’re feeling. This will help you take your emotions into account. Just putting a name to your emotion can help you move a little more into your wise mind.
To increase your emotions, you can also spend a little time imagining how you might feel about the decision later on. Thinking about whether you’d feel happy, anxious, sad, or filled with regret can certainly help you make a wiser decision.

We all have wise minds—and we have the ability to tap into them. Once you learn to start doing that, you’ll get better at finding your wise mind and you’ll grow more comfortable using it to make better decisions.

Your mental health will certainly affect whether you depend on logic or emotions to make decisions. Here’s how I’ve seen that play out in my therapy office.

I worked with one woman who had battled depression for years. Absolutely nothing sounded fun to her—which is a common symptom of depression. She felt numb to most emotions except for a deep sadness that was constant. So her decisions were based on logic only. She turned down opportunities to do things with friends. She didn’t buy anything she didn’t need because there was nothing she wanted. And she didn’t have any hobbies that she enjoyed. She lived a really structured life not because she was self-disciplined but because she felt numb and she was just going through the motions.

Her treatment involved bringing more emotion into her decisions—which is something that we did as we also treated her depression. She practiced using decisions with her wise mind—which meant eating out with friends sometimes or buying herself a new pair of shoes that she wanted but didn’t necessarily need. Doing things that sparked a little happiness—even if she didn’t feel like doing them at first—helped her feel better. Over time, she learned to recognize her wise mind and once she began making decisions based on a more balanced outlook, she started to feel better.

More often than not, though, my clients were on the other end of the spectrum making decisions based almost solely on emotion, and not factoring in logic.

There’s a man who came to therapy because he felt as though his life had fallen apart. He essentially did whatever felt good right now—he’d cheated on his wife (which is why she left him), he used drugs, he spent money he didn’t have, and he never followed through with his commitments. He’d declared himself a poor decision maker and said, “That’s just who I am.”

His treatment involved him learning to see that he had plenty of opportunities for growth and he could learn to make better decisions. In his case meant looking further into the future. If he wanted to create a better life for himself down the road, he would need to make some sacrifices today.
One of the strategies that worked well for him was to write down a list of reasons why he should or shouldn't do something. For example, he created a list of all the reasons why he should stick to his budget. When he was tempted to make an impulse purchase, he'd read over that list and it helped raise his logic and balance out his emotions. Over time, he learned to better tap into his wise mind and make better decisions.

Keep in mind that we all have room to improve our decision making skills. So invest some time into thinking about how to tap into your wise mind. When you’re about to make a decision, think about the balance between your emotions and logic. And take action to create a better balance before you make a choice.

You’ll likely find that over time, you get better at tapping into your wise mind and each good decision you make will give you more confidence about your ability to make good decisions in the future.

If you know someone who could benefit from learning about how to make wise decisions, share this show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast! And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who took a whole year to make the wise decision to come work with me), Nick Valentin.