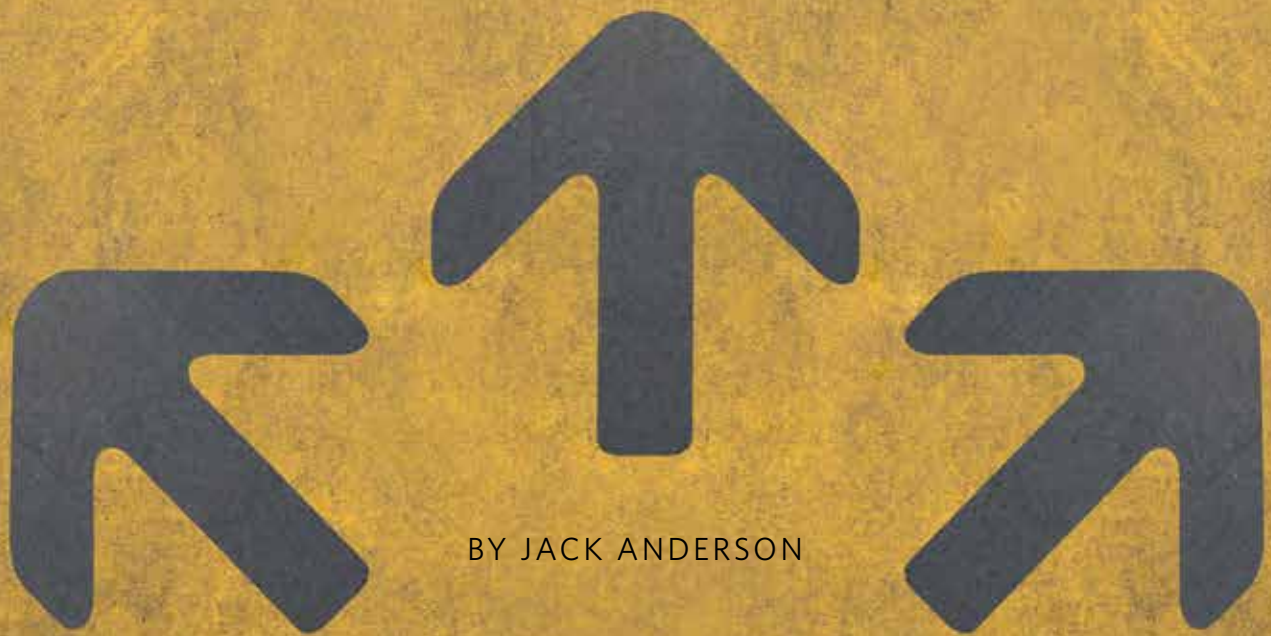


Creative Approaches *for* Better Decision Making



BY JACK ANDERSON



HENRY DAVID THOREAU said he “wished to live deliberately.” I, too, want to be decisive, and yet I often feel paralyzed by indecision. Each alternative seems equally important. Even after I decide, I’ll second-guess myself. I also make impulsive choices I regret. I therefore don’t trust my decision-making ability. Like the batter who stops swinging to avoid the pain of striking out, I stop living my life “deliberately.”

I’ve learned it’s all in the approach!

Decision making can be difficult for those of us with ADHD, but it’s not impossible. Our brains may work differently, but they do work. We may think we need a new brain or more willpower, but we may just need a few creative solutions and a fresh approach to decision making more suited to our ADHD brains.

Let’s **RETHINK** our general approach

We can relieve some of the stress involved if we rethink the way we approach decision making. The systems, strategies, and tools that work for those without ADHD may not work well for you. And the best process for organizing, managing time, or making decisions is the process that works best for you.

- **Think *strategic*, not *systematic*.**

Any approach to a task that is linear or systematic is rarely user-friendly for the ADHD brain. Yet there are essential aspects to any decision-making process (such as define goals; list options, benefits, risks, etc.). Keep these aspects in mind, but design your own process and carry it out in a way that works for you. Companies like Pixar, 3M, and Apple promote a culture that fosters innovation. Your brain can discover solutions no one else sees. So build a culture for yourself that lets your innovative mind thrive.

- **Think *holes*, not *drills*.**

Marketing guru Ted Levitt explains that drill customers actually need a hole, not a fancy drill. The drill is simply a means to obtain a hole. What is your end goal? Don’t lose sight of that goal in your pursuit of order, efficiency or a formula. It’s easy to overcomplicate minor decisions and oversimplify major ones.

- **Think *tools*, not *rules*.**

Rules must be obeyed. No exceptions. There’s only one right way. But tools are task-specific. The best tool is whichever one helps you accomplish the task. Your list of strategies is not a to-do list. It’s your toolbox. Keep adding to it as you learn. (This concept comes from *Spirituality for the Rest of Us* by Larry Osborne.)

Let’s **RETOOL** specific solutions for common dilemmas

How do we know which solutions to use? It may help to see decisions as doors and difficult decisions as locked doors. Solutions are keys that help us open locked doors. Just as a key has no value unless we know which door it unlocks, solutions are only practical if we know which problems they help us resolve.

I attend a support group for adults with ADHD in Kansas City. We recently shared our greatest challenges related to decision making. They included dilemmas like impulsivity, procrastination, overpreparation, fear of failing, too many options, lack of confidence and motivation, inertia, and many others. We’ll only address a few here. Build your own toolbox by identifying your own dilemmas and finding useful tools. See this list as a ring of keys or a box of tools. It’s not a recipe. Use the tool you need when you need it.

DILEMMA #1

Inertia and Lack of Motivation

- **To get it done, make it fun!**

“Shoulds” and “oughts” rarely motivate the unmotivated. Find a fun approach that holds your attention and engages your interest. List all the pros and cons you can in ten minutes or brainstorm with others. (This idea and the next one are adapted from *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life* by Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau.)

- **Divide the dreadful into micro-moments.**

If you dread it, divide it. Pick one aspect of the process

(define the decision, for example). Just do that for now. Big projects require numerous choices. List the choices that must be made and take one at a time.

- **Throw away the carrots and the sticks!**

In his book *Drive*, Dan Pink questions how well rewards and punishment really motivate us to initiate or sustain effort. He proposes we find intrinsic motivation by focusing on what we like to do or do well. As for tasks we don't like or excel at, can we find a new motivation that syncs with our values or desires?

- **Turn your thoughts into action.**

You can't always think your way out of a problem. Take action! Journalism professor Bill Raeder says, "Thought is useful when it motivates action and a hindrance when it substitutes for action." Similarly, Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller states, "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting."

DILEMMA # 2

A Cluttered and Distracted Mind

- **Caution—information overload ahead!**

In the book *Find your Focus Zone*, Lucy Jo Palladino says, "Information overload occurs when a person is exposed to more information than the brain can process at one time." Too much information at once overstimulates your brain, leading to stress, confusion, and indecision. Set limits on Internet use, mental exertion, and even television. Your brain deserves a break today. And it'll work much better tomorrow!

- **Think like a restaurant server.**

A busy restaurant cannot let tables stay cluttered. Dishes are removed once the food is eaten. Servers constantly declutter. We add so much to our "mental table" without ever subtracting anything. Since we can only make one decision at a time, let's make better ones by removing unrelated distractions. (Thanks to Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau for this one, too.)

- **Structure is your friend.**

We often resist structure, and yet structure can free our minds to focus on what we enjoy. Scheduled routines you keep at regular times reduce the number of choices that you need to think about.

DILEMMA # 3

The Overwhelming Challenge of Too Many Options

- **Pick a leg!**

A lion tamer holds a stool in front of him to divide the lion's focus (some even attach shiny medallions to each leg). With his focus divided between the four legs, the lion can't lock in on his prey and is less likely to charge. If we try to look at everything, we focus on nothing and then we do nothing. So pick a leg and *charge!*

- **Be a "satisficer" not a "maximizer."**

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz introduces us to "maximizers" and what he calls "satisficers." Maximizers seek the best possible choice, which means hours of agonizing and paralyzing evaluation. Satisficers first define a few preferred criteria for making a choice (for example, *I want a DVR with these three features and under \$200*). When an item meets their criteria, they buy it and waste no time in regret.

- **Be a chooser, not a picker.**

Choosers make decisions about their decisions. *Is it important? Must it be made now or made at all? Must I make it? Which option best meets my criteria?* Choosers make a choice only when they know what they want. Pickers don't know what they want. They browse yet resist making an actual choice. (This is also from Barry Schwartz.)

DILEMMA # 4

Perfectionism

The next three solutions are also adapted from *The Paradox of Choice* by Barry Schwartz.

- **Learn to accept "good enough."**

Settle for a choice that meets your core requirements. Don't insist on making the elusive "perfect" decision. Some decisions matter more than others. Let the time and attention you give a decision match its overall importance.

- **Don't worry about what you're missing.**

Limit how much you think about the seemingly attractive features of options you reject. Focus instead on the positive aspects of the selection you make.

- **Control expectations.**

“Don’t expect too much, and you won’t be disappointed” is a cliché. But this is sensible advice if you want to be more satisfied with life. Expecting too much from your decisions puts too much pressure on the decision-making process. It also breeds disappointment, even when the results are satisfactory.

DILEMMA #5

Lack of Confidence

- **Cancel the audition!**

A decision is more stressful when we care too much about its impact on others. While we must consider others, we may choose unwisely if our only motive is to obtain approval. It’s a decision, not an audition. (Thanks to Stephen Furtick, *Crash the Chatterbox*, for this title and idea.)

- **Stop sabotaging yourself.**

I’m often so obsessed with my self-improvement plans that I can’t see my strengths and contributions. If I measure my worth by how well I perform, then each forgotten task, late arrival, or poor decision only confirms my self-doubts. My friend and ADHD coach Kay Grossman helped me greatly when she said, “Jack, your critical self-judgments hinder you more than your organizational struggles.” Your attitude toward yourself and your ADHD will help you press on through the highs and lows of decision making.

Swing for the fences!

There is no guarantee you’ll never make a mistake or an unwise choice. In fact, you can plan on striking out and on getting some hits. Don’t let the fear of a wrong decision keep you from deciding. You can rebound from any mistake, except the mistake of never making any. So live deliberately! Swing away! 🎯

Jack Anderson is a member—and sometimes guest facilitator—of the ADHDKC Support Group in Kansas City, Missouri.

ADDITIONAL READING

Stephen Furtick, *Crash the Chatterbox* (Multnomah, 2014).

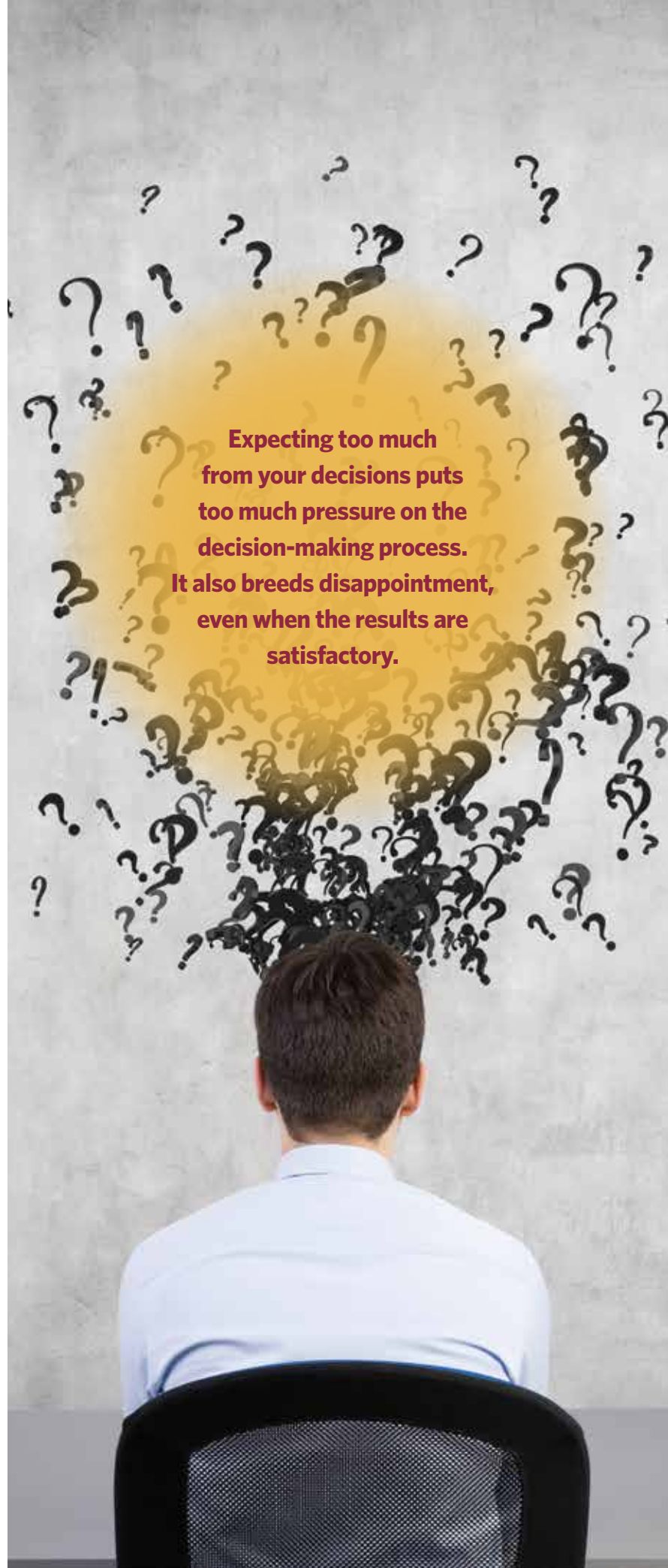
Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau, *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life* (Routledge, 2002).

Larry Osborne, *Spirituality for the Rest of Us* (Multnomah, 2009).

Lucy Jo Palladino, *Find your Focus Zone* (Atria Books, 2007).

Dan Pink, *Drive* (Riverhead, 2011).

Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (Harper Perennial, 2005).



Expecting too much from your decisions puts too much pressure on the decision-making process. It also breeds disappointment, even when the results are satisfactory.