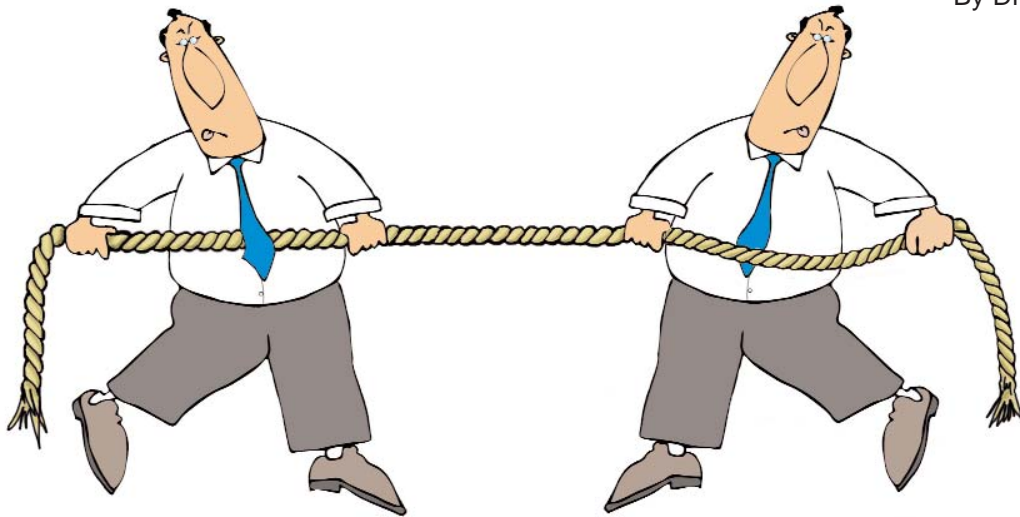


# YOU VS. YOU

By Dr. Larina Kase



## Resolving Your Emotional Conflict When Faced With Life's Toughest Decisions

We all know this feeling. We're faced with one of life's toughest decisions and feel overwhelmed. It may be an exciting decision about a wonderful opportunity like a job promotion, a move across country, or adopting a child...

Unfortunately it is rarely so simple. There are almost always mixed emotions involved. Greater rewards go along with the greater risks. The higher the upside, the greater the downside. A new job would be thrilling but it will require you to work more and have a longer commute, cutting into your valuable family time. A cross country move to your dream locale would be amazing, but you'd have to move away from friends and into an area with a higher cost of living. Adopting a child would be wonderful, but you worry how your other children would react.

### Anxiety Rears its Head

The most common emotion you'll face when making difficult decisions is anxiety.

Anxiety = Fear of a future situation + Uncertainty about your ability to handle it.

It's easy to become focused on potential downsides and become paralyzed. You

start to feel that you're *choosing* all of those future calamities if you go for the change. How could you possibly do this? So you get stuck.

Getting stuck in anxious anticipation can be like getting stuck in quicksand; you just keep going down further. Imagine you've been analyzing a particular decision for three months. It becomes harder and harder to make a choice and take action. Instead of battling the quicksand, though, you battle yourself.

### Decisions in Uncertain Situations

The most difficult part of making decisions is that the variables and the outcomes are often uncertain. We would do anything to be certain. We'd even pay our hard-earned money, as shown in one study in which college students were asked whether they would purchase a great deal on a trip to Hawaii over their holiday break. The students were told they would receive the grade on their most important exam before they had to decide. Of those who were told that they passed the exam, 57 percent said they'd go for the trip, and 54 percent of those who were told that they failed said they'd go.

When cognitive scientists Amos Tversky and Eldar Shafir designed uncertainty into the mix, everything changed. Students were told that they would not receive the exam grade for two days and that they could buy the trip now, pass on it now or pay five dollars to wait for two days until they received their grade. A whopping 61 percent said that they would wait. They wanted to go if they passed *or* if they failed the exam, but they were willing to pay to wait if they didn't know their grade.

We are often paralyzed by uncertainty and end up basing our decisions on things that aren't even related. Question your attempts to find certainty before making decisions because it may be a false sense of security. It may be best to accept uncertainty and move ahead anyway. The way to do this is to tell yourself that you may never know for sure and to go with your gut reaction.  
Limit Your Choices

One of the decision-making mistakes we commonly make is to give ourselves a lot of options. We figure that if we go through everything, we'll have better choices and make the best decision. The problem is that we may make no decision.

In 2000, Sheena Iyengar of Columbia Business School and Mark Lepper, chairman of Stanford's psychology department, conducted a study in which two tasting displays of gourmet jams were set up in an upscale supermarket. They had 24 jams set up for tasting in one display, and just six jams in the other. They found more people were attracted to the table with 24 and an equal number tasted at both tables. But there was a huge difference in purchasing resulted: only 3 percent of those who had tasted at the table with 24 jams bought a jar, whereas 30 percent of those who had tasted at the table with 6 jams bought a jar. To make decisions effectively, limit your options.  
Get an Objective Opinion

Sometimes we are simply too close to a situation to view it objectively. While it's hard to find someone who's com-

pletely objective, it can be helpful to hear another point of view.

Let's say that you are offered a promotion at work. Make a list of three people you can talk to for other perspectives. Be clear about each person's level of objectivity. Your husband's objectivity level is low because your decision will directly impact him. Your colleague at work ranks medium because your decision is unlikely to affect him, but he may be disappointed to have you go to another department. A career coach's objectivity level is high because she is not related to your company or your family, does not have a stake in your decision and can offer an outside perspective.

## Intuition is a Powerful Guide

Participants in a study conducted by Timothy D. Wilson and his colleagues at the University of Virginia and the University of Pittsburgh were asked to choose a piece of art to hang in their homes. Half of them were asked to think rationally about their choice, and the other half were instructed to go with their gut. Those who went with their feelings rather than their analysis were happier with their selection. We can rationalize our way into anything, but our first impressions often tell us how we really feel.

Hone your skills at listening to your intuition by building some form of meditative practice into your daily life. It doesn't have to be actual meditation; it can be a few moments of reflection, a warm bath or a walk with your dog. We are so bombarded with information all day that we miss opportunities to notice ourselves thinking and feeling. To hear your intuition, you must have some times where you're a human *being*, not a human *doing*.

## Keep Anxiety in its Place

As we've discussed, anxiety about difficult decisions is perfectly normal. It's even helpful. A moderate level of anxiety helps you to stay energized, think through potential contingencies and

highlights what you care about. The problem enters when anxiety becomes too high. With excessive anxiety, you'll feel horrible, lose sleep and have a harder time making decisions.

The way to handle high anxiety is to ask yourself two questions:

### 1. What is the likelihood that the worst case scenario would occur?


Using the cross country move example, you'd say, "What is the likelihood that we'd lose all contact with our current friends and make new friends?" You will probably see that the likelihood of your worst fears coming true is very low.

### 2. How would I handle it if it happened?

Again using the move example, if you weren't making any new friends, what could you do? You could join a gym, take a class, get involved in a community organization, invite your neighbors over for a housewarming party, and so on. You'll see that you could probably handle your feared outcome.

## Go For It!

Once you've accepted uncertainty in a situation, narrowed your choices, gotten other perspectives, listened to your intuition, and kept anxiety at bay, you are ready to make a decision and go for it. Realize that few decisions in life are irreversible and we will never have a crystal ball to tell us what will happen in the future. The way that we expect to feel in future situations is typically not how we end up feeling. We just need to make the best choice with the information we have available at the time.

Put yourself on your own side and you'll have no regrets. 

**Dr. Larina Kase** is the author of "*The Confident Leader: How the Most Successful People Go from Effective to Exceptional*," which is about confronting challenges, making difficult decisions, and being the leader of your career and life. Learn more and get great bonuses at [www.ConfidentLeaderBook.com](http://www.ConfidentLeaderBook.com).