

Decision Making

Dolores Robles, MA, Mt. San Antonio College
Department of Family & Consumer Sciences

Our role as educators goes beyond teaching in the classroom. As a Life Management educator, I have had the opportunity to serve as a tutor, mediator, and most recently, a life coach. A course of this kind allows students to share personal experiences and disclose what some of us might consider to be private information. Depending on the class and the student, some will share during class discussion without hesitation while others will opt to share privately.

This semester, I have had two students ask for thoughts and advice on both personal and academic decisions they were facing. Both of the students that I spoke with were great students. By this I mean, they attended class regularly, participated in class discussions, and were successfully completing the course. I listened to their stories, and attempted to help them explore their issue and come to a decision on their own.

A review in Psychology Today (2008) on a university study on cognitive shortcuts and college students stated that “the best real-world decision makers are not those with high IQs, but those with good thinking habits, such as the tendency to consider a problem from multiple angles” (Nixon, 2008, p.30). Most people follow 6 general steps in making decisions. Goldsmith (2005) uses the acronym DECIDE as an easy mode of remembering the steps:

Define the decision
Estimate the resources
Consider alternatives
Imagine the consequences of the alternative courses of action
Develop an action plan and implant it
Evaluate the decision

Not all decisions will require this process as some of life’s decisions are more complicated than others. According to Goldsmith, a person makes decisions based on their knowledge, ability, motivation, and values. It is important to note that our values influence our approach to solving problems and are ultimately manifested in the decisions that we make (Massey, 2005). The attitude that a person has toward solving a problem may affect whether a problem is actually solved. According to Throop and Castelluci (2004) a reactive approach toward problem solving encompasses negativity while a proactive approach accepts responsibility and commitment to solving the issue. Throop and Castelluci refer to the PrOACT approach to problem solving. The following steps illustrate a proactive approach to problem solving:

Problem: Figure: One’s ability to solve a problem is dependent on how it is defined.

Objective: Know what your objectives are.

Alternatives: Think of as many possible solutions to the problem as you can.

Consequences: For each alternative come with consequences. Find which alternatives have consequences that match your objectives.

Trade-offs: Evaluate pros and cons to each probable solution and decide on acceptable trade-offs.

The uncertainties that exist in today's world can bring on additional stressors in one's life, especially for college students. My students have expressed concern regarding the availability of jobs and their ability to attain a secure financial future. The decisions that students have to make regarding their education, money, and family matters (to name a few) are critical to their overall well-being.

Managing stress and decision making or vice versa are central to Life Management. According to Bell and D'Zurilla (2009), the term social problem solving is the self directed cognitive-behavioral process by which an individual attempts to identify or discover effective ways of coping with stressful daily problems. Hamarta's (2009) review of literature on problem solving skills revealed that people who have effective problem-solving skills have better: mental health, low anxiety, high self esteem, more confidence in decision making, stress coping skills, and have more life satisfaction. Hamarta's study on social problem solving among university students and prediction of self-esteem and life satisfaction found that self-esteem is positively related to positive (optimism) problem orientation and rational problem solving. For that reason, individuals who have high effective problem solving skills have higher levels of self-esteem. Having high self-esteem in this context, means that a person is confident in their ability (knowledge and skills) to solve problems. Harriot, Ferrari, and Dovidio's (1996) study examined the motives for indecisiveness among college students. Their findings revealed that student indecision was significantly related to day dreaming and lack of concentration and not necessarily to thoughts of low self-worth.

The PROACT and DECIDE models which approach problem solving in rational ways are excellent tools to use in our class discussions. It is important to note that these frameworks may not apply to all of life's situations nor do they guarantee results. However, utilizing these frameworks may help identify alternative courses of action that were not previously considered. Identifying alternate courses of action may help increase satisfaction with decision making in the long term.

References

- Bell, A. C. & D'Zurilla, T. J. (2009). The Influence of Social Problem-Solving Ability on the Relationship Between Daily Stress and Adjustment. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 33, 439-448. doi:10.1007/s10608-009-9256-8.
- Goldsmith, E.B. (2005). Managing work and family. *Resource management for families and individuals* (277). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth
- Hamarta, E. (2009). A prediction of self-esteem and life satisfaction by social problem solving. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 37(1), 73-82.
- Harriot, J.S., Ferrari, J.R., & Dovidio, J.F. (1996). Distractibility, daydreaming, and self-critical cognitions as determinants of indecision. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 11(2), 337-344.
- Massey, M.E. (Writer). (2005). *What you are is where you were when - - again!* [Videotape]. United States: Enterprise Media.
- Nixon, R. (2008). When Stupidity Attacks. *Psychology Today*, 41 (4) 30.
- Throop, R.K. & Castellucci, M.B. (2004). Managing Time. *Reaching your potential: personal and professional development* (293-294). Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning