Why Career Decision Making Can Be So Difficult.
by Janet Scarborough Civitelli, Ph.D. – 2014

Career decision advice is one of the main services that clients seek from career counselors and coaches. This is because deciding an occupational focus can be difficult.

Sometimes after several weeks or months of exploring potential industries and jobs, it can feel discouraging if decisions don’t seem crystal clear.

Some clients lament that there are no perfect possibilities and that all the possibilities have some “tragic flaw.” Others say, “Nothing looks interesting,” or, “I’m interested in so many things, I don’t know how I can possibly focus on any direction.”

Many clients are upset that choosing a career isn’t like buying a car at an auto mall where all possible choices are featured in one place.

The research process itself is overwhelming, and even if you hire a career counselor or coach to assist you, no one can just tell you which career option is best for you.

If you are struggling with the career decision-making process, the following nine concepts are some reasons why you may be getting stuck, followed by some action steps about what to do:

1. "Fear of Disappointment."

As long as you don’t move in any new direction, you are able to keep the fantasy that there is an ideal career out there for you, but you just haven’t found it yet.

Once you make a real career choice, you are put in the position of grappling with both the good and the bad about your decision, which entails facing a certain amount of disappointment.

Action to take:

Take advantage of informational interviews with other people regarding their work. You will find that all career paths involve some aspects you might not like and all choices involve some tasks that aren’t entirely enjoyable. The goal isn’t to find a 100% good match, you’re doing well if you hit 80 - 85%.

By doing informational interviews with those already in the field about how they spend their work days, etc., you can benefit from their years of experience rather than trying each career choice yourself.

2. "Fear of Making a Mistake."

Clients often want a guarantee that their decision will be the “right” one. The truth is, there is no way to predict in advance what the effect of moving in a direction will be. That’s just a fact of life.

After getting additional experience, you may love what you are doing or you may not. The challenge is to keep moving closer and closer to a path that feels right to you.

Research shows that many people at the end of their life regret having passed up opportunities out of fear, while those who strive to attain their goals rarely regret the mistakes they made during the process.

Action to take:

Read autobiographies and biographies of successful people. Notice that their career trajectories are rarely linear. Most life stories involve not just successes but also mistakes, challenges, and setbacks. The only people who
never make mistakes are the people who never do anything.

3. "Rage Against the Ordinary."

Clients who rage against the ordinary feel outraged and furious that they must endure anything tedious, routine, boring, or unpleasant.

Action to take:

Several strategies to increase frustration tolerance, include devoting time and energy to helping others or learning new skills that require delaying gratification while enjoying progress in incremental steps.

4. "Unwillingness to Compromise."

If your goal is to earn an extremely high income, the reality is that it will likely take a lot of time and energy to hone a set of skills or run a business that the market place values. You may need to pursue more education or training or to tolerate political bureaucracy while you climb a corporate ladder.

Alternatively, if you want the autonomy of self-employment, you must be prepared to take the responsibility of navigating your own career ship, with all the risk that this entails. I have yet to see a “get rich quick” scheme that actually works.

The happiest people are OK with paying their dues and being patient. By contrast, unwillingness to compromise can result in decision paralysis, frustration, and distress.

Action to take:

Decide one or two values about which you are unwilling to compromise, and let those values guide your decision-making. Try to find options that are congruent with as many of your values as possible, but realize that no one gets 100% of what they want.

5. "Lack Experience Making Decisions."

If you don’t have a lot of experience making decisions with high stakes, you might feel like you aren’t equipped for such a big task. You may secretly wish that someone would do all the research necessary and simply give you the type of career choice advice as to what you should do. The problem with this fantasy would be that no one can possibly know you as well as you know yourself, and you are in the best position to know what path to take.

Action to take:

Practice making any decision is helpful to flexing the decision-making muscles. Start with smaller decisions that feel fairly straightforward, and build to more challenging decisions. Do more of what you know has a history of working well for you.

6. "Bad Habits."

Some clients come from family environments where anxiety and worry have become a bad habit. Others are just temperamentally more prone to worry and have to work harder than other clients to feel peaceful and optimistic.

Action to take:

Practice cognitive reframing by replacing anxiety-provoking thoughts with more reassuring ones. For example, if you find yourself thinking, “I can’t choose a career and I’ll never be able to choose one,” replace that thought with, “If I do the research and invest the time to explore my choices, I will be just as equipped as anyone else to make a good decision.”

Research shows that cognitive reframing is highly effective if you do it consistently and you choose reframed thoughts that are both hopeful and believable to you.
7. "Fear of Losing Approval or Love."

Some family members or friends want to be supportive of you but they are genuinely convinced that the only way for you to be happy and successful is to become an "engineer" or a "physician" or a "teacher" or a "lawyer" or whatever THEIR favored career choices are. They may be giving you career choice advice that would be right for them but isn’t right for you! The problem is that other people’s dreams which may be right for them might not be in sync with your, values, personality, interests, and skills.

**Action to take:**

If you are unaccustomed to resolving conflict with loved ones, you might want to get some counseling from a family therapist who has expertise in helping clients to set boundaries and achieve autonomy without losing valued connections.

8. "Isolation."

If you don’t have good role models for success, career decision-making can seem more daunting than it otherwise would be.

**Action to take:**

Gather a community of people more experienced than you so that you can learn; people who are your peers or colleagues who share your successes and failures; and people who are more junior than you that you can teach and mentor. Career counseling is also useful to accelerate the process of evaluating which career options fit with your interests, values, personality, and skills/abilities.

9. "Depression / Hopelessness."

If career decision-making causes you to feel sad, pessimistic, despairing, etc. and you find that you can’t snap out of it, you may be clinically depressed.

**Action to take:**

Talk to a mental health counselor about taking a psychological assessment and get treatment before trying to choose a career path. Trying to make major life decisions while depressed is difficult at best. It would be much better to first get professional help and then tackle career challenges.