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How to make critical decisions amid Covid-19 pressures

David Chan

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Time pressure and ambivalence are common when people make decisions in a crisis. Understanding the psychological dynamics helps us slow down to make better decisions.

The Covid-19 crisis has affected people's quality of life and livelihoods, and it will continue to do so. There are many new demands to adapt to, both ongoing ones and those in the post-pandemic realities.

Amid adaptation challenges galore, we sometimes have to make decisions involving high stakes, under time and conflicting pressures.

The stakes are high because the decisions have important implications for ourselves, our loved ones or even our nation.

Pressures abound when we need to decide one way or the other within a short time, and it is unclear to us which is best or better.

Consider some examples under Covid-19 pressures: Should I switch or stay in my job? Should I close or continue my business? Should I spend the money now or save it for future needs? Should I vote for A or B in this election?

Depending on the choices available, our experiences as well as the prevailing circumstances and possible futures, deciding to go one way may be better than the other.

These factors are different for different individuals, so there is no science that can tell us which decision is better. But behavioural sciences can help us make better decisions by understanding the factors that go into making decisions in difficult times.

Time pressure

Behavioural sciences tell us that time pressure occurs when we have less time available than we think we need to come to a decision.

Research has shown how time pressure affects the way we think and feel, which in turn influences our decision-making process.

First, when we are under time pressure, we tend to narrow our cognitive focus. We zero in to think about one or two issues that we consider relevant and key, and then proceed to come to a decision.

We are less likely to brainstorm ideas, identify possibilities, seek feedback or advice, and consider different viewpoints.

The problem of narrow focus is not just insufficient scope. It is exacerbated by confirmatory bias - our human tendency to selectively seek out and interpret information in a way that is likely to confirm our preconceived belief about a particular option. This could be either a positive or negative evaluation of the option.

The consequence is that we see what we expect to see, which in turn strengthens our belief or position, never mind what the objective facts are.

Next, time pressure produces not only stress but also a variety of emotions. For instance, we may feel angry or cynical or develop a sense of unfairness if we think that the issue is too important to be decided in the short time given, or that the decision-making time span imposed is unnecessarily short.

It is important to know that time pressure can easily evoke these negative emotions. Such negative feelings can influence our decision-making more than they should or more than we want to let them, and can therefore bias our decision without us knowing it.

This applies even when it is understandable or justifiable to feel negative about the time pressure.

For example, when asked to decide to accept or reject a job offer, it is understandable that we would feel negative about it if we are given a shorter deadline than we like.

But even if the short deadline is a relevant consideration, we should not let our negative feelings about it disproportionately influence our evaluation of the job offer and end up not examining those factors that are important when making the decision.

Typically, time pressure does not generate positive emotions, but it can still tilt us to favour a particular option when we feel the need to make a decision quickly.

This happens because of the halo effect and the optimism bias.

The halo effect occurs when we have a positive overall or first impression of a person or product, and it leads us to conclude positive things about other distinct aspects even though we do not have the relevant information to make a proper evaluation.

For example, we may conclude that a person who came from a humble background is also an honest person, even though we have no factual information about the person's honesty. There is no evidence that socio-economic status and honesty are correlated.

The halo effect becomes more problematic if our positive overall or first impression is misguided, or if it was previously valid but is no longer so.

The halo effect can thus lead to inflated positive evaluation of an option, and also result in our missing negative characteristics that might have affected our decision had we considered them.

A preferred option already burnished by the halo effect may be strengthened further by confirmatory bias or optimism bias. That is, being overconfident of our own judgments and having an unrealistic belief that the future will be better, even though there is no supporting evidence.

Ambivalence pressures

Apart from encountering time pressure, anyone making decisions in a crisis may also experience feelings of ambivalence.

We may be torn between A and B because we have mixed feelings about either choice.

This is no different from many aspects of our personal lives or work. We like and dislike certain traits of our spouse, friend, colleague or boss. We have positive and negative feelings about working from home. We feel conflicted when put in a moral-dilemma situation. We have mixed feelings and thoughts when reacting to major policy debates on controversial issues.

The experience of mixed feelings and thoughts, or what psychologists call "ambivalence", is a state of internal conflict.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, ambivalence pressures are particularly salient and stressful for people when the stakes are high, such as deciding whether to change jobs or whether to close or continue a business that is badly bruised.

We recognise that there are pros and cons, but we are unable, or find it very difficult, to choose between two opposing options or actions to arrive at a decision.

When we are in a state of ambivalence, we feel conflicted because we have beliefs or experience emotions that are incompatible.

Conflicts of belief occur because we need our thoughts to be coherent when we form judgments about a person or group - we want our various beliefs to be internally consistent.

We see positive traits as consistent with one another but not with negative traits, and conversely, we see the same for negative traits. Which is why seeing a mix of positive and negative traits in the same person or group leads to ambivalence in beliefs about the person or group.

Emotional conflict is felt most when we experience incompatible emotions - love and anger towards someone we care about, or respect for and disappointment with the leaders we support.

For example, we experience strong emotional conflicts when we have to decide whether to report a wrongdoing committed by a close friend or someone we look up to. We are torn between feelings of loyalty to friendship or mentorship, and feelings of responsibility to the organisation or society.

When we experience belief or emotional conflict, our dissonance and feelings dominate. They can easily overwhelm and override the rational reasoning that we may engage in initially. Moreover, being pulled in two opposite directions is psychologically discomforting.

That is why when we experience ambivalence from having strong opposing beliefs or incompatible emotions, we feel pressured to quickly take a position and reinforce that position, especially when we think we need to make a decision soon.

But rushing to a decision makes us susceptible to cognitive biases and emotion-based influences. We become more vulnerable to confirmatory bias, halo effect, optimism bias and strategic persuasion by others.

To avoid making a decision prematurely because of ambivalence pressures, we need to pause and think about the future consequences of a decision.

Relate the consequences to what really matters to us, anticipate the regret we will feel from not thinking through things before deciding, and focus on the benefits we can have from making the effort to arrive at a decision.

This is easier said than done. We need some practical guidance to do it.
Getting better at making decisions

To resolve ambivalence while under time pressure to make a decision, we should focus on four areas.

GOALS

When under time pressure and conflicted by competing beliefs and opposing emotions, ask what the goals that we really want to achieve are.

When goals are clarified, some of the positives and negatives in the mix may change in their relevance and impact.

Also consider how the goals are related to one another. If they are contradictory, we need to prioritise, coordinate, choose or make trade-offs. But if they are common, or at least not mutually exclusive, we can connect them to converge with or complement one another.

INSIGHTS

Learn and apply the insights on time pressure and ambivalence. This involves evaluating our beliefs and regulating our emotions. Be aware of our own biases.

We gain new insights when we examine issues in context and find out facts objectively, instead of seeking out information selectively to confirm beliefs.

Check with those who can be trusted to tell the truth. Consult those who are knowledgeable in the relevant area, especially when the time available to make a decision is limited.

VALUES

Values represent our convictions about what is important and remind us of what ought to be. They shape our attitudes, affect our thoughts, influence our emotions and guide our behaviours.

Values are critical when we are emotionally conflicted. Our emotions may contest our rationality. But our emotions are often influenced by our values, and can change to align with our value system.

To respond to time pressure and resolve ambivalence, put our core values at the centre of what we think and feel, and how we act.

This could mean cherishing character traits of integrity and accountability, creating a fair and just society, or caring about our country and our fellow citizens.

EXPECTATIONS

Evaluate whether what we hope to happen, and believe can happen, is based on realistic expectations and therefore is likely to happen.

When expectations are realistic, they are also less likely to be extremely positive or negative. This in turn reduces the intensity of ambivalence.

When presented with arguments on what might happen if we choose one way as opposed to the other, distinguish between what is possible merely in theory, and what is practical and more plausible.

When under time pressure, search for relevant information and verify facts to engender more realistic and well-informed expectations.

To conclude, adopt the "GIVE" approach to clarify goals, capitalise on the insights, centre on our values and calibrate our expectations.

The Covid-19 crisis creates new high-stakes decision-making demands for us, with time and ambivalence pressures. No one can dictate to us which decision is best, nor can science prescribe the answer. But we can become better at making decisions.

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