



Stanford eCorner

Choosing Well in Life

Dave Evans, *Stanford Life Design Lab*

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Stanford lecturer Dave Evans, co-author of the New York Times bestseller “Designing Your Life,” goes through the basic steps for decision-making: gathering all options, narrowing down the choices and picking one. But instead of doubting or regretting that choice afterward, which people often do, Evans cites leading psychologists who assert that our intuitions can equate with intelligence, and that happiness “is not getting what you want. It’s wanting what you got.”



Transcript

at that, then you gotta narrow 'em down to a manageable list and then you gotta do the hard thing and make a choice and then of course, agonize whether or not you blew it. No, let's not do that, let's let go of the options we don't choose and move on. So, I'll briefly touch each of these I mean, gonna go really fast. You know how to do that. Narrow it down. Anybody ever feel a little overwhelmed with choice? Yeah, interesting. So you got that feeling, why? Because you don't know what jam to buy, the research shows that we walk into some Whole Foods store somewhere and put six jams on the designer table, there's six jams available today, everybody's walking by, you think many people stop and look or not too many? A lot of people, not a lot of people? A lot, about 40%, not quite half. Of those, how many people actually buy one? A third, one in three, not bad. Okay, try it again, a couple of weeks later, same store, same provider, 24 jams, ooh. Now, more people stop, fewer, more? Fewer? Right.

50% more. We love options! Ooh look at all the jam, oh my god! Look at all the jam! How many people buy? Nobody. Can't deal with it, why? Your brain freezes at four to six. You find yourself standing in front of an option list with seven to 12, how many options do you really have? None. What do you do? Cross them off. You have to make your list manageable. Then you gotta choose, That's Dan Goleman, whose clip we will not watch, given we have no time, that the wisdom of the emotions is a real thing. So Dan Goleman, the original author of the book Emotional Intelligence, mostly aggregating other people's work, he's still working on this EQ EI stuff, identifies neuroscientifically now, neurophysiologically, how many brain people we got in the room? We've got Tina Seelig with a Ph.D. in neuroscience, a bunch of brain stuff going on, it's really a fascinating time to be alive. We know a lot about the soft stuff now, turns out we know a lot of hard stuff about soft stuff.

The way your brain works. And the way your brain works is there is, what he calls the wisdom of the emotions, or the wisdom center, actually located in the basal ganglia of your brain, the ancient brain, where in fact all the data on what worked for you and what did not is stored, that valences your decision making, right? You think it's self-evidently objective truth that causes you to make a decision? Because clearly bigger is better, right, because you want a bigger tumor, not a smaller tumor. No, that's not true, bigger is not always better, it depends, bigger is good in IPO, and it's bad in tumor, is actually an emotional valence on something, who has to decide that cancer is a bad thing. Now that comes from the basal ganglia, which, as it turns out, has no connectivity whatsoever to the verbal center of the brain, the verbal cortex, has high connectivity to the limbic system, your emotions, and your intestines. So the gut feeling is a real thing. Learning how to understand your emotional intelligence, which is a very very important sophisticated part of you, is a critical aspect of good decision making. Do not confuse inarticulate with unsophisticated. This part of your consciousness is fabulously sophisticated, but it's more like Hawaiian, it uses fewer letters. So you have to learn how to speak its language. Now lastly I'd like to move on, I'll just claim

what Dan Gilbert, a buddy over at Harvard who works on, turns out the research shows if you want to be happy, the happiness engineers, turns out the best way to be happy is not getting what you want, it's wanting what you got.

The reversible condition is not conducive to the synthesis of sustainable happiness, Dan would say. I won't detail you the research, but it shows that when somebody makes a decision, and either themselves concludes or is told it's irreversible, and other people make the exact same decision, like what to buy, or what to take home, and can reverse the decision, even if they don't, those people end up unhappier with the exact same outcome as these people who got it irreversibly. Your willingness to own your decision and not be distracted by the other possibilities is a huge impact on the quality of the decision long term. So it turns out actually it's harder than you thought. You don't just have to make a great decision, you have to make a great decision well. A fair decision made well, meaning energetically implemented, letting go of the options and moving on, not getting stuck in reviewing regret, a fair decision implemented well beats a great decision made badly. And that keep your options open thing is actually a disaster as a long term strategy. It's great on the front end, it's terrible on the back end. So set yourself up to win by understanding your decision making process and employing not just cognitive knowing but emotional knowing as well. So connect the dots, understand how your work view and life view inform your coherence, have more than one version of the future of your life to pick from, prototype it, don't just analyze it.

Ask for directions, people are willing to help you, and make a good choice.