



113: Decide to Decide

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 113. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. Many of the decisions we make are second nature. I'm here for the ones that aren't. A lot of what we talk about here isn't always about a specific decision that you might be holding, like whether or not you should move to another city or which school will be the best fit for your child. Instead, we talk a lot about mindset, about posture, and about cultivating a listening way of life so that when tough decisions come our way, we're better equipped to move through them.

But sometimes we do get into the details of decision making, and today is one of those times. As I pay attention to my own life and the life of people around me, I've come to the conclusion that we can trace a lot of our anxiety, stress, and feelings of overwhelm back to a single, or a series, of unmade decisions. It's not always because we're putting those decisions off on purpose. Sometimes it's because we don't even realize we're carrying them. Today's episode is a simple practice in uncovering decisions that need to be made and doing the next right thing to make them. Listen in.

All decisions are not created equal. We already know this. Choosing a vocation has different consequences and implications than choosing a paint color. So many factors are at play when we make our choices. Daily, we have to consider our schedule, our energy, our family, and our finances. Less often, but still regularly, we may have to think about our life stage, our legacy, and what matters most. On a few occasions in our lifetime, we may also have to make decisions that are a matter of life or death.

No matter if our decisions have large or relatively small impact on our lives or the lives of those around us, all decisions have one thing in common. Before we make them, we have to know what they are.

Whether you're choosing a job, a spouse, a plan of care for an aging parent, or a sofa for your living room, the most basic and obvious common denominator that we may even take for granted in these decisions is the fact that we're aware there's a decision to be made. In all of these situations, we have come to an awareness of the fact that we have a choice and we know

what those choices are. How we arrive to our choices, with anxiety, excitement, dread, or determination, well, that's second to the first task of knowing what the decision is in the first place.

Okay. That's where we have to begin. You might be thinking, "Emily, what gives, why are you saying such obvious things on this podcast episode today?" Well, I'll speak for myself, and I'll say that sometimes it's not the decisions in my life that are stressing me out. It's my lack of awareness that a decision either does or does not need to be made right now. If I'm feeling overwhelmed in my work, it could be because jobs are just stressful sometimes, or it could be because there are decisions that need to be made that I either consciously don't want to face or subconsciously don't even realize were there.

So I'll indulge our human desire for a step-by-step and I'll offer three steps that you can take when you feel overwhelmed but can't quite name why.

Step one: pause and assess. In what areas of my life am I experiencing overwhelm, stress, anxiety, hesitancy or conflict right now? When you ask yourself that question, try to resist the urge to paint in broad strokes. Well, parenting is just stressful. No. What part of parenting? Is it a particular child? Yes. In your own honest mind, you can admit or confess that there is a particular child that is causing you stress. Is it a specific issue, a recent conversation, a regret, a fear, or a denial? Pause and assess.

Step two: name the decision specifically. I'll use that work stress as an example. Is there a scheduling question that needs to be answered? Is there a relational issue that needs to be resolved? Is there a deadline that's already passed and needs readjusting? Or is it possible that your stress about work actually has nothing at all to do with your job, and everything to do with maybe your lack of sleep or your terrible eating habits? Maybe you think you need to make a vocational change when really the decision is a lifestyle adjustment or a relational conflict that you're having.

Now, here's a hint. If you're having trouble naming the specific decision that needs to be made and you can't say it in simple English, or the language of your choice, then consider if there's a decision that needs to be made at all. You may be trying to force action where action isn't yet required or maybe even warranted.

Finally, step number three: decide to decide. Once you've paused and assess the situation and finally become honest and clear about the decision that needs to be made. Well, that doesn't mean you automatically have clarity about what to do next. You may not be ready to make a particular choice, but you can at least become clear about exactly what the choice is, and decide that you will make that choice and when. Sometimes I have to give myself deadlines like, okay, I'm going to decide whether or not to go on that trip by Thursday afternoon.

It's possible you're rolling your eyes at me right now and saying, deciding to decide is really just

a procrastination tactic, and we need to just go ahead and make the decision already. I understand that you might be thinking that, and if you are someone who tends to be an action taker, then this whole process might seem like a ridiculous step to take, like an unnecessary detour in this decision making process. But for those of us for whom taking action is a little more difficult, this practice can be a life-giving partial solution. It buys us time while still holding us accountable to follow through.

Deciding to decide has given me a great sense of relief at times when I'm not ready to actually decide, but I know I need to move. It's like a baby step of progress, and sometimes that's all we can manage. Decision making is not only for, quote unquote, leaders or bosses or presidents or grownups or for those for whom action taking comes natural. It's for all of us.

With that in mind, it's wise to leave room for everyone's process, including yours. If you're experiencing a fair amount of stress or overwhelm in your life these days, pause and assess.

What area of life is causing the most stress for you right now?

Is there a decision hiding beneath relational conflict or vocational overwhelm?

Have you been avoiding that decision because it feels too hard?

Are you able to name what decision you need to make? If not, don't force it.

The lack of naming could be an important indication that there's just no choice right now to make at all. At least, not in the way you may have thought. Instead, maybe there's an invitation to draw near to God in the midst of the overwhelming circumstance that you cannot decide, or choose your way out of right now.

But if you have uncovered a decision that needs to be made and you are able to name what it is, go ahead and decide to decide. You don't have to make a choice today, but pick a date on the calendar when you need to decide by. And then, between now and then, have patience. Take care, do your research, ask good questions. Trust God, listen to your life, and do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 113 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple habit of deciding to decide can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. If you need even more help with a particular decision in your life right now, a few more resources that could go hand in hand with this episode, if you have my book *The Next Right Thing*, check out chapters 7, 9, and 13. I think they might help at least point the way a little bit if you're struggling with a particular decision right now.

Well, as always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com, or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. In closing, I'll leave you with these words from Ann Patchett in a little book she wrote called *What Now?*

“Sometimes the circumstances at hand force us to be braver than we actually are, and so we knock on doors and ask for assistance. Sometimes not having any idea where we’re going works out better than we could have possibly imagined.”

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.