

Understand My Inner Life

The Decision Untangler

A psychoeducational worksheet from Understand My Inner Life — for when every choice feels like it could be the wrong one, and you'd rather not choose at all than choose badly.

Free, yours to keep — print it or fill it in digitally. A complete, self-contained tool: the science, a worked example, the worksheet, and what to do in the moment.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A couple of things to know first

This file is for you. The notice below sets out your licence to use it, and there's an important word on what this is — and what it isn't.

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This is psychoeducation and self-help — not therapy, diagnosis, or crisis care. If you are struggling significantly or thinking about harming yourself, please reach out now:

Emergency: 113 (Norway) · 112 (EU) · your local number · Norway: Mental Helse 116 123 · UK/IE: Samaritans 116 123 · US: 988 · AU: 13 11 14 · findahelpline.com

How to use this file

Print it, or fill it in on any device — it's yours to keep and return to as often as you need. There's no right pace, and no need to finish in one sitting. Work through it in order, or open straight to the part you need today. Take what helps, leave what doesn't, and be as patient with yourself here as you would be with someone you love.

START HERE

More options should mean more freedom. Past a point, they mean paralysis.

If you can spend an hour choosing a paint colour, re-read the same menu five times, or lie awake re-litigating a decision you already made — you are not indecisive by nature, and you are not failing at something everyone else finds easy. You are running into a genuine feature of the modern mind: given enough options and enough fear of regret, the machinery that's supposed to help you choose seizes up. The exhaustion is real. So is the way out. This worksheet is about deciding *well enough to actually live*, instead of optimising yourself into a standstill.

The goal is not to make perfect decisions — there is almost never a knowable perfect choice, and chasing one is the trap itself. The goal is to decide in line with what you value, set the bar at **good enough**, and then close the loop so the decision stops eating your attention.

How to use this

Read the two science pages once — understanding *why* choice overwhelms takes much of its sting away. Then keep the worksheet nearby. Next time you're stuck, work the steps: *name it, weigh by values, satisfice, close the loop*.

Who it's for

The thoughtful, conscientious people whose strength — caring about getting things right — has curdled into dread of getting them wrong. The over-researchers, the tab-hoarders, the ones who confuse more analysis with better outcomes. If that's you, the problem isn't your judgement. It's a strategy that can be swapped for a better one.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Why this exists

Why I made this — and who it's for.

For eight years I have worked in mental health, most of them in acute psychiatry — the ward people come to on the hardest nights of their lives. I started young; I was nineteen when I began, the youngest person hired onto my unit. I say that so you know this did not come from a textbook — it came from the room, from years of sitting beside people while they found their way through.

And I kept seeing the same thing. People were seen by the system, given a diagnosis, and sent home without the tools to actually live with it. The waitlist that never moved. The therapy that didn't quite land. The lonely sense that something is wrong, and no words for what. I have stood in that gap through years of listening to people in mental health services. I have also stood in it myself.

A word on who I am: I am in clinical psychology training, not a licensed psychologist, and I work on the floor, in the room. What you are holding is psychoeducation — not treatment, and not a substitute for it.

So this is not here to sell you a transformation or a quick fix. It is here to give you language for what you feel, and a way to meet it that doesn't ask you to have it all together first.

I have never wanted to stand above the people I meet. There is far less distance between the person who asks for help and the person who offers it than we like to pretend — a different year, a different loss, and any of us could be the one on the other side. The thing I believe most, I learned from Irvin Yalom: that the real change happens in the encounter itself, two people being honest in the same room. A workbook can't be that room. But it can be honest with you, and it can put something real in your hands to do.

That is what this is. Take what helps. Leave what doesn't. And be as patient with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

"You don't need to be ready. You don't need to have it together. You just need to be willing to try."

— from the person who built Understand My Inner Life

THE SCIENCE · 1

Why more choice makes it harder

You can't out-think a trap you don't recognise. So first, see its shape.



set 'good enough, by my values' before you compare — the finish line the endless search never had

The psychologist Barry Schwartz called it the *paradox of choice*: beyond a certain point, more options don't liberate us — they overwhelm us, lower our satisfaction, and make us more likely to choose nothing at all. Three forces explain it.

Maximising vs satisficing — A *maximiser* needs the best possible option, so every choice becomes an exhaustive search with no natural end — there's always one more thing to check. A *satisficer* sets criteria and takes the first option that meets them. The striking finding: satisficers make objectively fine decisions and feel far better about them. Maximisers get marginally 'better' outcomes and feel worse (Iyengar, Wells & Schwartz, 2006).

Opportunity cost & anticipated regret — Every option you choose means rejecting all the others — and the mind tallies what you're giving up. The more alternatives, the heavier that imagined loss, and the louder the pre-emptive regret: *what if the other one was better?* So you freeze, to avoid the pain of a wrong call you haven't even made.

Analysis paralysis — In a famous study, shoppers offered 24 jams were far *less* likely to buy than those offered 6 (Iyengar & Lepper). More information past a point doesn't sharpen the decision — it floods the working memory that's meant to make it, and the system stalls.

Why this changes things: your paralysis isn't a character flaw or a lack of willpower. It's the predictable result of treating a 'good enough' decision as if it were an 'optimal' one. Change the goal from *best* to *good enough, in line with what I value*, and the machinery starts moving again.

A note on the evidence: the size of the 'choice-overload' effect varies by context (later reviews find it real but smaller than first thought) — but the core finding this guide rests on, that *maximising lowers satisfaction*, is robust.

Drawn from Schwartz, The Paradox of Choice (2004); Iyengar & Lepper (2000) on choice overload, with Scheibehenne et al. (2010) on its moderated effect size; and Simon's concept of satisficing (1956).

THE SCIENCE · 2

Why overthinking feels productive — but isn't

The mind tells you one more lap will bring certainty. It won't. Here's why.

Overthinking a decision has the texture of work — you're concentrating, weighing, researching — which is exactly why it's so seductive and so useless past a point.

The hunt for certainty that doesn't exist

Much decision-paralysis is driven by *intolerance of uncertainty* — the very human wish to *know* the outcome before committing. But most real decisions are made under irreducible uncertainty; the 'certainty' you're waiting for will never arrive. So the mind keeps searching for a guarantee that doesn't exist, and calls the searching 'being careful.'

Values are the real compass

When two options are genuinely close, more data won't separate them — because the deciding factor isn't external, it's what *you value*. Most agonising decisions are actually values clarifications in disguise: not 'which is better?' but 'which matters more to me — security or growth, closeness or freedom?' Asked that way, the answer is usually already in you.

"Good enough" is a strategy, not a compromise

Satisficing isn't settling. It's recognising that for the vast majority of decisions, several options would serve you well, the difference between them is small, and your time and peace are worth more than the marginal 'best.' Reserve real optimising for the rare, high-stakes, hard-to-reverse calls. For everything else, *good enough, decided, and moved on* beats perfect-but-paralysed every time.

Mechanisms: the intolerance-of-uncertainty model (Dugas & colleagues); Gigerenzer on fast-and-frugal heuristics; values-based choice in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes).

WHY THIS IS SO HARD

Why you can't just ‘make a decision’

If ‘just pick one’ has never quietened the paralysis — here's why.

Decision paralysis isn't indecisiveness or weakness. It's the predictable result of how a careful mind meets too many options and too much fear of regret.

You're chasing a certainty that doesn't exist — Much paralysis is the wish to *know* the outcome before choosing. But real decisions are made under uncertainty — so the mind keeps searching for a guarantee it can never get.

Maximising is exhausting by design — If the goal is the ‘best’ option, the search has no finish line — there's always one more thing to check. The standard itself is what's draining you.

Regret is pre-felt — The mind tallies everything you'd give up by choosing — and makes you feel that loss in advance. So you freeze, to avoid a pain you haven't even incurred.

So if knowing hasn’t been enough: if you can't just decide, that's not a flaw in your judgement. You've been holding a good-enough decision to an impossible ‘perfect’ standard.

And here’s the hope — this is the part that matters: the fix isn't more willpower — it's changing the goal to ‘good enough, by my values,’ and closing the loop. Each decision you make and don't re-open proves the catastrophe rarely comes. The experiment on the next pages gathers that proof.

ONE PERSON'S STORY

Before & after

A composite picture — illustrative, not a real person — of how this work tends to go.

Maya, 38 (a composite, not a real person), used to lose whole evenings to small choices — which laptop, which flat to view, what to reply to a text. Here's what changed, and what it took.

BEFORE

She kept forty browser tabs open 'to be thorough,' and still felt she'd probably pick wrong. The deciding never felt finished — even after choosing, she'd re-litigate it at 2 a.m. Friends said 'just pick one,' which only made her feel broken, because she *couldn't*. The exhaustion wasn't from the decisions; it was from never letting any of them close.

WHAT HELPED

Two things moved it. First, naming most decisions as *recoverable* — which dropped the stakes from 'life sentence' to 'adjustable,' and let her breathe. Second, setting the good-enough bar *before* she compared, and writing a one-line 'why' she could reread instead of reopening the whole search. The timer did the rest: choose at the buzzer, then change task on purpose.

AFTER

Six weeks on, she still cares about getting things right — that hasn't changed, and she wouldn't want it to. But the small choices take minutes now, the 2 a.m. re-litigating has mostly stopped, and the attention it freed up has gone back into the parts of life that actually matter to her.

"I didn't need to become less careful. I needed to point the care somewhere it could finally rest."

If you recognise yourself in the 'before': that careful, tab-hoarding, can't-quite-land version of you is *exactly* who this works for — not despite your conscientiousness, but by giving it a finish line. The skill is learnable, rep by rep, and the next pages are where you start. You've got this.

SEE IT DONE

A worked example

Before you fill it in, watch the untangler work on a realistic, everyday stall.

Priya, 29 (a composite, not a real person), has two job offers and has been frozen for nine days — spreadsheets, pro-and-con lists, three friends consulted twice each, and a growing dread that she'll pick wrong and ruin everything. Here's the same decode you're about to learn.

1 · THE DECISION
Stated cleanly: accept Offer A (bigger company, more money, longer commute) or Offer B (smaller team, less pay, work she finds meaningful). One real fork — not the fifty sub-questions she's spun off it.

2 · THE REAL STAKES
Is this high-stakes and irreversible, or recoverable? Both are good jobs; either can be left in a year. ⇒ **recoverable.** That alone lowers the temperature: this is a good-enough decision, not a life sentence.

3 · THE VALUES UNDERNEATH
More data won't separate them — her values will. Named honestly: she values *meaning and learning* over status and salary, and has for years. The agonising 'which is better' was a values question wearing a spreadsheet.

4 · THE GOOD-ENOUGH BAR
Set in advance: "A role that grows me, on a team I respect, that pays my rent." Offer B clears it. So does A, less well on the value that matters most. The bar makes the answer visible.

5 · CLOSE THE LOOP
She picks B, writes one line on *why* (the values), and pre-commits: no re-deciding, no re-opening the spreadsheet. When doubt visits at 2 a.m., she rereads the line instead of re-running the search.

Nothing about the two jobs changed. What changed is that an endless optimisation became a *named fork, named stakes, named values, and a closed loop* — a decision a person can make and then actually live inside.

THE WORKSHEET · 1

Untangle it

Next time you're stuck, work down the steps. Don't research harder — clarify.

1 · The decision — state the actual fork in one sentence, stripped of all the spin-off sub-questions.

2 · The real stakes — is this high-stakes and hard to reverse, or recoverable? (most decisions are far more reversible than the dread suggests)

- ☐ **High-stakes & hard to reverse** — worth genuine, time-boxed care
- ☐ **Recoverable** — a good-enough decision; speed and peace matter more than the 'best'

3 · The values underneath — when the options are close, which of *my* values is the real deciding factor? (security / growth / closeness / freedom / meaning / stability…)

4 · The good-enough bar — written *before* I look again: what must an option clear for me to be at peace with it?

Setting the bar first is the work. Decide what 'good enough' means *before* you compare, and you stop the endless search that has no finish line. The bar is the finish line.

THE WORKSHEET · 2

Decide & close the loop

The two moves that turn a decision from an open wound into a settled thing.

5 · Satisfice — which option clears my good-enough bar, best serving the value that matters most? (the first that genuinely clears it is allowed to win)

Time-box it — the moment I will decide by, after which more deliberation is not allowed (write the actual time/date):

The one-line 'why' — the reason, in my own words, that I'll reread when doubt returns instead of re-opening the whole search:

The pre-commitment — "I have decided. I will not re-decide this unless genuinely new information arrives." What will I do with the doubt when it visits anyway?

"A good decision you commit to beats a perfect one you never make. Choose, close the loop, and live."

IN THE MOMENT

The 10-minute decide

For the small, recoverable choices that eat far more life than they're worth. ~10 minutes, then done.

Most daily decisions don't deserve a worksheet — they deserve a timer. Here's the fast protocol for the choices that aren't worth the agony they somehow generate.

1. **Name the tier.** “Is this reversible?” If yes — and it almost always is — this gets minutes, not hours. The dinner, the email wording, the booking. Tiny stakes, tiny deliberation.
2. **Pick the gut-first option, then sanity-check.** Notice the option you leaned toward in the first few seconds — the gut is often a fast read of your values. Then give it one quick check against your good-enough bar. If it clears, it wins.
3. **Set a timer and choose at the buzzer.** Literally. Five or ten minutes. When it sounds, you commit to wherever you've landed. The deadline does what endless deliberation never will: it ends.
4. **Close the loop, on purpose.** “Decided. Moving on.” Then physically change task. Re-opening it is not diligence — it's the spiral. Starve it of attention.

After trying it — what did the deadline reveal that the endless deliberation never could?

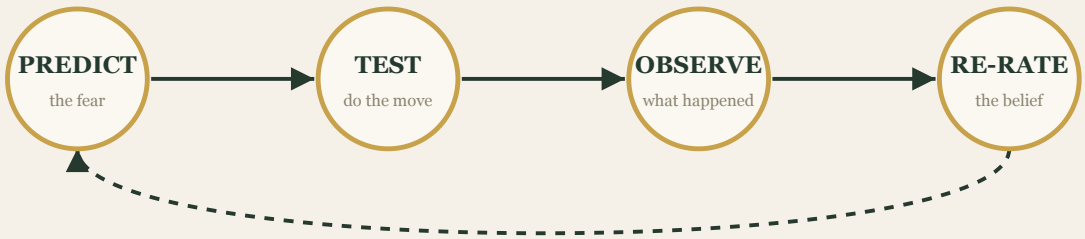
When the doubt comes back: a returning doubt is not new information — it's the same loop seeking a re-entry. Unless something genuinely new has arrived, you don't owe it another lap. Reread your one-line ‘why,’ and let the decision stay made.

PRACTISE IT · 7 DECISIONS

Decide seven, and close the loop

The skill isn't deciding once — it's deciding, and then not re-deciding. So gather the evidence.

Take seven small, recoverable decisions over the next two weeks. For each: set a good-enough bar, satisfice, time-box it — and then, the real test, refuse to re-open it. This is a **behavioural experiment** — one of the core methods CBT uses to change a belief: you don't argue with the fear, you *test* it in real life and let the evidence update it.



each round, the belief updates — then you run it again

Before · Set it up

The belief I'm putting to the test. What do you predict if you decide fast and don't re-check? (the fear — 'I'll regret it / choose wrong')

How strongly I believe that *right now*: _____ / 100

The move I'll make. The specific, doable thing I'll do to test it:

e.g. take the first option that clears the bar · set a 10-min timer · write the one-line why · don't re-check it

When & how often: **7 times over the next two weeks** — aim for one a day.

What I expect will happen. Exactly what do I predict when I do it?

My best guess at how I'll feel afterwards (0 = awful, 10 = fine): _____ / 10

DURING & AFTER · THE DAILY LOG

Run it — and watch the evidence build

One honest line a day. The belief score falling, day by day, is your change made visible.

Each day, three small steps: (1) do the move — even a tiny version counts; **(2)** write one honest line on what *actually* happened (not what you feared — what real life did); **(3)** re-rate how strongly you still believe the original fear, 0–100. After each: did you re-open it? Did the regret you feared actually show up?

You don't need a perfect run — miss a day, just pick it up the next. Even four honest entries will show you something real. Watch the last number, not your mood: that score drifting down, day by day, *is* your change, in your own handwriting. Keep going — you're doing the part most people only read about.

Day	What I did — and what *actually* happened	Believe the fear now /100
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

When the 7 are done — the verdict

What actually happened, across the reps. Across seven decisions — how often was the 'wrong choice' catastrophe real? What does that tell you about the searching?

What the evidence actually says — my updated belief, in my own words:

Believe the *original* fear now: _____ / 100 — compare it to your starting score. That gap is the proof, in your own handwriting.

However far it moved — even a little — you just tested a fear instead of obeying it. That is the whole skill, and it compounds every time you use it. Be proud of this page, and keep it.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Common traps — and the truth

The beliefs that keep careful people frozen, and what's actually true instead.

“There's a perfect choice, and I have to find it.” — For almost every real decision, there's a *range* of good options, not one hidden right answer. The belief in a perfect choice is the engine of the paralysis — it turns a manageable decision into an impossible search.

“More research will make it clear.” — Past a point, more information floods the system rather than sharpening it. When two options are close, the deciding factor is your values, not another spreadsheet row. The clarity comes from looking inward, not gathering more.

“I'll commit once I feel certain.” — Certainty usually arrives *after* you commit and start living the choice — not before. Waiting to feel sure is waiting for a feeling that commitment itself produces.

“If I choose wrong, it's a disaster.” — The vast majority of decisions are more reversible than the dread claims. You will adjust, learn, course-correct. Catastrophising the ‘wrong’ choice is what makes any choice feel unbearable.

“Deciding fast means I don't care enough.” — Deciding well enough and moving on isn't carelessness — it's wisdom about where your finite attention belongs. Caring about everything equally is how you end up exhausted and stuck.

The one to remember: the goal isn't the best possible decision. It's a values-aligned, good-enough decision you actually commit to — because a decision made and lived beats a perfect one endlessly deferred. Your peace is part of the outcome.

KEEP THIS

The pocket version

Photograph this page. The whole untangler, in the time it takes to set a timer.

When you're stuck, ask in order:

1. **Decision** — the actual fork, in one sentence.
2. **Stakes** — reversible? (almost always — so: minutes, not hours)
3. **Values** — which of *my* values is the real decider?
4. **Bar** — set 'good enough' *before* comparing.
5. **Close** — satisfice, time-box, write the one-line why, don't re-decide.

For small choices:

Name the tier · pick gut-first · set a timer · choose at the buzzer · "Decided. Moving on."

"I don't need the best choice.
I need a good-enough one I actually live."

The paralysis isn't a flaw in you. It's a careful mind chasing a certainty that doesn't exist — and you are learning, rep by rep, to decide by your values and let the rest go.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Where this comes from

Real, published work — so you can read further, and check it for yourself.

The ideas here draw on published research and established psychological theory; the key sources are below, with enough detail to find them. Some framings (the images and metaphors) are my own, built from that work; a few practical heuristics (noted as such) come from books or everyday practice rather than single studies.

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less.* HarperCollins.

Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (2000). When choice is demotivating: Can one desire too much of a good thing? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(6), 995–1006. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.995

Iyengar, S. S., Wells, R. E., & Schwartz, B. (2006). Doing better but feeling worse: Looking for the "best" job undermines satisfaction. *Psychological Science, 17*(2), 143–150. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01677.x

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Dugas, M. J., & Robichaud, M. (2007). *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment for Generalized Anxiety Disorder.* Routledge. — intolerance of uncertainty.

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Bennett-Levy, J., Butler, G., Fennell, M., Hackmann, A., Mueller, M., & Westbrook, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Oxford guide to behavioural experiments in cognitive therapy.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780198529163.001.0001 — the behavioural-experiment method.

How to go deeper: To find any of these: copy the *title* (in quotation marks) into Google Scholar (**scholar.google.com**) — journal articles often show a free PDF link on the right, and books are available from any library or bookshop. For the frameworks used here: self-compassion (**self-compassion.org**, Kristin Neff), Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (**contextualscience.org**), Metacognitive Therapy (Adrian Wells), and CBT (the **Beck Institute**, beckinstitute.org).

✶

This is the first thread.

One worksheet won't end a lifetime of second-guessing — but learning to decide by your values and close the loop changes the texture of every day that follows. If this helped, the full *Understand My Inner Life* Emotion Regulation course is where you learn to do this with the overthinking underneath it all: why the mind loops, what it's seeking, and exactly what to do in the moment — step by step, with the same care and depth — skills you can keep for life.

> *"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."*
>
> CARL ROGERS

Understand My Inner Life · Built on 8+ years of frontline work in mental health services.
This is an educational resource, not a substitute for therapy. In crisis: Mental Helse 116 123 · findahelpline.com
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CONTINUE YOUR WORK

Where to go from here

More tools, and the deeper work — for whenever you're ready.

If this helped, here's where it continues. The free tools are yours to keep; the deeper programs are where this work goes much further, with the same care and depth.

Go deeper

The Emotion Regulation Course — the full method, step by step

Perfectionism & Burnout — for the quietly exhausted

The Secrets of the Brain — how your mind actually works

The Limerence Workbook — when a person becomes the thing you can't put down

The Saturday Morning Protocol — a weekly 90-minute ritual

The Relapse Prevention Toolkit — keep the gains you've made

The Accountability System — close the gap between knowing and doing

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