

# The Best Headspace for Making Decisions

Anger is not the best way to approach a big choice—but neither is happiness.



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**SCIENCE**

Let's say you're making a hard choice, one that could impact your life significantly. Every time you think you've settled on something, the other option tugs you back to its side. You end up where you started: It's a draw.

Should you make ever-more-detailed lists of pros and cons and seek advice from even more trusted sources? Or should you go with your gut?

Many people would suggest the latter: Listen to your gut, or your heart, or some other part of your body that couldn't possibly know what those stock options will be worth in five years. For the advice-giver, "Just do what feels right!" is safe

guidance to offer, since if you nudged the decision-maker toward a huge mistake, at least they'd feel good making it.

But according to the research of Jennifer Lerner, a professor of public policy and management at Harvard, that might be the exact wrong way to go about it. In a [series of studies](#) she recently published with Christine Ma-Kellams at the University of La Verne in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, she found that, in a task where managers were trying to detect an interviewee's emotions, they assessed the situation more accurately when they thought systematically, than when they just relied on intuition.

In fact, much of Lerner's research focuses on how emotions can influence decision-making—and not always for the better. Your gut, to the extent that it reflects your feelings, might be steering you wrong.

Take anger, one of the emotions Lerner and other psychologists understand best. Where fear breeds uncertainty, anger instills confidence. Angry people are more likely to put the blame on individuals, rather than “society,” or fate. Anger makes people more likely to take risks and to minimize how dangerous those risks will be. Other researchers have shown that angry people rely more on stereotypes and are more eager to act. It's an activating emotion: In lab [studies](#), people shown angry faces crave a reward more intensely.

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## **“If someone steals your meat, you strike back quickly.”**

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This trigger-happy impulse is evolutionarily adaptive, Lerner said. “We evolved in hunter-gatherer times,” she told me recently. “If someone steals your meat, you don't think ‘Should I go after him?’ No! You strike back quickly.”

For a [2003 study](#), Lerner had a group of U.S. citizens read either a news story about anthrax mail-threats, which was meant to make them feel afraid, or one

about celebrations of the 9/11 attacks by some people in Middle Eastern nations, which was meant to elicit anger. Those who were made to feel angry saw the world as less risky, and they also supported harsher measures against suspected terrorists. We saw this angry certainty play out in Congress: Only one member, Barbara Lee, a Democratic representative from California, voted against the authorization to use military force against terrorists in the wake of the attack.

“We said, ‘We’re acting, we’re striking back,’” Lerner said. “Everyone agreed.”

She also sees anger’s influence on this election cycle. [Americans are angry](#), and many of them want a brusque, brash leader who will hold the bad guys accountable. According to Lerner, anger can be beneficial during the primaries. It’s good for voter turnout. “Anger is the primary emotion of justice,” she said. “With Bernie Sanders’ campaign and the Trump campaign, there was a lot of anger driving them. It brought people to the table.”

But when it comes to actually electing someone, anger confuses more than it helps. Anger simplifies our thinking. People switch to rules of thumb—*ban all the Muslims!*—instead of carefully considering refugee policy and its implications.

“Right now, we shouldn’t be thinking in a shallow way,” Lerner said. “Now, we need to be thinking about very specific policy tradeoffs. Anger gets you in the game, but once you’re in the game, you need to think.”

Surprisingly, though, happiness isn’t much better at inspiring good decisions. Several [studies](#) have shown that people who were in a positive mood put more faith in the length of a message, rather than its quality, or in the attractiveness or likability of the source. Given that it’s typically the amicable job interview that results in an offer, this might explain some of the economic advantages that flow to [tall men](#) or [attractive people](#).

Under certain circumstances, sadness can be good, since it fosters systematic thought. The slightly melancholy, to whom no option appeals very much, will dutifully think, “on the one hand, x, but on the other hand y,” Lerner said. And that’s good! But too much sadness can set off rumination— “you keep thinking x, x, x, x,” she said—which is not going to get you any closer to signing on the dotted line (or not!) with satisfaction and relief.

What’s more, sadness might make you more impatient. A [2013 study](#) by Lerner and others found that people who felt sad accepted up to 34 percent less money in order to get paid now, rather than three months from now. But at least it might make you more generous toward others: She’s also [found](#) that sad people allocate more to welfare recipients than angry people would, since the angry would likely blame poor people for their own misfortune.

There appears to be no mood that would put you in the perfect frame of mind for, well, making up your mind. So what’s a decision-maker to do? The best bet might be to accept that you’re going to have emotions, but to try to keep them from influencing your thought process.

First, you could make yourself wait to react—though this can be hard when you have the *perfect* email retort burning through your drafts folder. You could also try to reappraise the situation, for example by viewing a layoff as a chance to finally pursue a lifelong goal, rather than as a crushing defeat.

Or, you could try to make your emotions irrelevant to your decision. Lerner recommends making a rubric with every element of a decision that’s important to you. For example, those deciding between two houses might list the number of bedrooms, the price, and the quality of the local schools. Next, assign each factor a weight—.2 or .5 and so on—so that all of the factors add up to one. Then score each option based on each dimension, and multiply the weights by the scores. You should end up a score that reflects the total, impartial assessment of each house’s relative merit.

Of course, people want their houses to “feel like home,” which introduces emotions back into the equation. But like flipping a coin and seeing if the result disappoints you, you can at least see what Robot You would choose. That might help reveal what Irrational-Human You truly desires.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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