

## CHAPTER 1

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# *Health Ignites Wisdom in Decision-Making*

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**H**ow, when, and why are the best decisions made? What does “making a good decision” even mean? What are the key characteristics? And, as the title of this chapter suggests, in what way does our multidimensional health play a critical role in our ability to make wise decisions, a capacity that stems directly from something we’ll call your personalized **Y.O.D.A.**? Y.O.D.A. stands for **Your Own Decision Advisor**.

The central theme of this chapter is that our holistic health—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual—is the vital starting point for sound, thoughtful, and measured decision-making. The headline: We simply cannot take in, consider, and thoughtfully process multiple streams of relevant information, both tangible and intangible, when we are anxious, depressed, sleep deprived, sedentary, isolated, and self-medicating with wine and M&Ms!

An uneven mind-body state like any of these only narrows the aperture through which we can fully see and think through life decisions of all shapes and sizes. And when we’re running on fumes, letting self-care slip to the bottom of the to-do list, and not integrating our highest values and beliefs into the recipe, our decision-making capacity is inherently limited. This limitation holds whether the issue at hand is small (like “What shall I have for breakfast?”) or large (like “Is it worth the family upheaval to move to another city for a more prestigious and better-paying job?”). The scenario presented in the introduction can happen to any of us. Whether in romantic relationships with our partners, as parents to our children, as colleagues in the workplace, and as members of our communities, we are just plain more apt to drop the

ball and show up as a shadow of our capabilities when we don't rank health and well-being as a top priority. Health is, plain and simple, the foundation for all else!

It is the so-called little decisions that often are the highest-impact levers to influence the big ones, those that can have massive implications for changing the trajectory of our lives. Our everyday micro decisions set the table for the macro decisions that we know full well have the potential to change everything. And, without question, both our micro and macro decisions will serve to powerfully shape our ultimate destinies.

The whole point of decision-making, at all levels, is to continually fine-tune and fortify the process so that our lives increasingly represent who we most want to be in life. Wise decision-making sets the stage for us to authentically and powerfully embody the way in which we show up in the world.

## DECISION-MAKING

The technical definition of the word “decision” is “a conclusion or resolution reached after much consideration.” But what exactly constitutes a *good* decision? What are the main characteristics, and how can we think about framing our process to feel a sense of confidence and competence in making decisions and judgments that may well alter the trajectory of our lives and the lives of those we care about for months, years, or lifetimes? How can we trust ourselves to bring our decision-making best, the entirety of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wisdom, when the stakes are highest, when the storms of life are raging, when we are fully aware that we are *not* at our mental and emotional best?

Stay tuned! In the pages that follow, we will provide concrete, practical answers to all these questions.

First and foremost, it's important to know that decision-making is a *learned behavior*. “Nurture,” our life experiences and the environments we are exposed to, shapes “nature,” the expression of our genes, hormones, neurotransmitters, and biochemistry, all of

which will be detailed later in Chapter 7. We humans are a 24/7, 365-days-a-year work in process, with the events in our outside lives shaping our molecular-level makeup on the inside and which, in turn, continually shapes how we look, feel, behave, and make decisions in life.

**Wise Decision Insight:** Our decision-making is powerfully shaped by observing how those around us make decisions, especially during childhood and adolescence. We learn what good and responsible decision-making looks like by absorbing how the key people in our lives make their decisions, particularly those people closest to us. We learn by observing the impact of their decisions over time on all concerned. We may reflect upon emotionally charged scenarios with key adults in our lives later down the chronological timeline, pondering whether we'd have made the same call if in their shoes. Simply put, one of the most important ways we formulate our understanding of smart and wise decisions is by witnessing the decisions others make, some of which go well and others that go poorly. We continually adapt our own decision-making style accordingly.

Your *decision* to acquire this book speaks to the fact that you might be interested in expanding your understanding of wise decision-making and exploring ways to improve your own. This all starts with an awareness of potential benefits, followed by the decision to purchase.

Reflect for a moment on *how, why, and under what circumstances* you typically make your best decisions. Consider also how well your history of decision-making has held up over the long game of your life. Improving how we approach and execute on the decision-making process is *hard work*. Consciously making a decision is step one, and following through with it, day after day, embedding a new way of thinking and deliberation into your decision-making repertoire is where the rubber really hits the road. But when this happens, in a disciplined and consistent manner, what once felt like awkward new behavior, something you were trying on for size, becomes the automatic path of least resistance.

As we will learn, when we can see outside of ourselves, rising above a tricky decision-making moment to pause, reflect, and identify what's really going on, it is nothing short of our decision-making

superpower. Put simply, our capacity for making sound choices is embodied in the power to *consciously reflect* and then act, rather than *impulsively react*.

Both research and experience have confirmed that basic things like being rested and healthy, achieving mental and emotional balance, and the like can, in and of themselves, facilitate better decision-making. When we consistently engage in healthy, growth-oriented behaviors, such as conscientious self-care, we steadily begin making decisions that are more thoughtful, are wiser, and are more aligned with our most cherished values and long-term goals.

## OUR BRAINS AND BODIES ARE ONE DYNAMIC INTEGRATED SYSTEM

If there's one fact biological and social science has made crystal clear, it is that the human mind and body operate as a **dynamically integrated system**. That's right, the *very same molecules*, neurotransmitters, hormones, immune system markers, gene expression patterns, and other biochemicals that shape our physical wellness *also* powerfully shape our mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness and, more broadly, our overall sense of well-being and happiness—and, not surprisingly, the quality of the choices we make.

“We are feeling creatures that think, not thinking creatures that feel,” in the words of famed neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. And the basic job of the mind-body system is to integrate data from our internal state of being, our feelings, with relevant input from the outside world experienced through our five “sensory portals” (sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch), to facilitate better choices and strive for a *positive* balance within the mind-body system.

On the topic of internal balance, a term scientists call “homeostasis,” it's important to note that there's much more to existence and human health than simply maintaining a steady neutral state at a cellular level. The true underlying human drive is to move us toward a decidedly *positive* energy state. While we have a basic inner biological drive to stay alive, to breathe, digest, and maintain on average a 97.8 degree temperature, our stronger intrinsic motivation is to *flourish*.

Accordingly, we can think of our integrated mind-body systems as continuously striving to achieve a net positive homeostatic state, driving energy throughout our brain and body in a manner that ups the odds for conscientious and responsible life choices.

Another important understanding is this: Conceptualizing health in discrete black-and-white categories of physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual capabilities is misguided and *overly simplistic*. The bare-bones fact is that health is highly nuanced, fluctuating with our biochemistry and lifestyle choices. Health is, by its very nature, a series of interactive, integrative molecular relationships, engaged in an ongoing, never-ending complex and sophisticated dance of nurture shaping nature, from the very start of life till the end. This fact represents a critical insight in our quest to make extraordinary decisions, as the chapters that follow will detail.

Scientific research is breaking new ground every day in terms of new and exciting discoveries about health and human potential. We know a fair amount about key mind-body dynamics and the neurobiological mechanisms by which they operate, but answering complicated questions and making big new discoveries most often simply leads to many more complicated questions. This is the beauty of evolution science, 3.8 billion years of the continuously unfolding story of cellular complexity, adaptivity, resilience, and growth.

Within this story of extraordinary scientific progress, a small handful of important molecules are known to powerfully sculpt our multidimensional health, and thereby our decision-making, and it is these which have received the preponderance of attention from researchers. The headline, after many decades of cutting-edge work, is that our health stems fundamentally from these under-the-skin molecular ingredients, ones that profoundly influence our growth and development through a dynamic biochemical cascade that flows throughout our entire integrated system. This all happens in a way even the most sophisticated researchers cannot pin down with absolute precision.

What's clear is that *everything affects everything else* and that changes can occur on a dime, consistent with our thoughts, behaviors, and life experiences. The vast majority of our knowledge about mind-body health comes from scientific research on the following

biochemicals, the very same ones affecting the mind and the body in dynamic and interactive ways, which in concert play a role in how we approach, make, and follow through with our daily decisions. (See Figure 1.1 for a basic overview of how it works.)

- **Oxytocin:** The “love” neuropeptide (molecules that can cross the blood-brain barrier) is a key ingredient in the recipe for positive feelings stemming from human bonding and love.
- **Opioid-like neuropeptides:** Mother Nature’s built-in pain relievers and the biological wellspring of euphoria, catalyzed by social connection and physical touch.
- **Serotonin:** Feel-good neurotransmitters that are natural happiness boosters and gastrointestinal system stabilizers.
- **Dopamine:** Mood-boosting neurotransmitters associated with novelty, excitement, and reward.

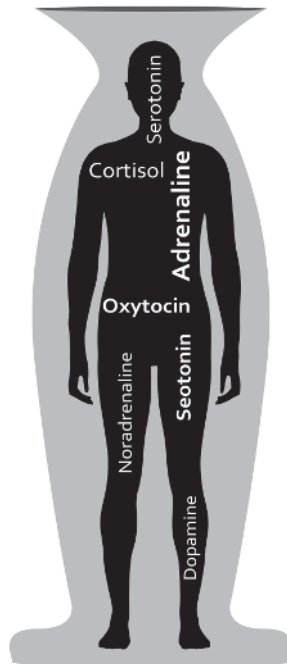


Figure 1.1 The human biochemical beaker.

- **Arginine Vasopressin:** Neuropeptides that regulate water, homeostasis (balance), and kidney function.
- **Cortisol:** Known as the “stress hormone,” cortisol influences inflammation, blood sugar levels, metabolism, and memory formation. Social support helps to keep cortisol levels in equilibrium.
- **IL-6 and IL-8:** Immune system biochemicals, cytokines, that are involved in the inflammatory response in the case of acute injury (e.g. sprained ankle), chronic disease (e.g. type 2 diabetes), and autoimmune disorders (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis), as well as mental and emotional health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and other major psychiatric disorders. In short, the inflammatory effect of these molecules is systemwide, affecting the function of both the brain and the body.

As discussed throughout the chapter, our mind-body systems are integrated and dynamically changing, with the same molecules that affect one element of our health affecting others. And now that you have a sense for the most well-known beneath-the-skin molecules that influence our health, and how what influences one element of our health affects the others, let's delve more deeply into each discrete but interrelated dimension of health to further explore how health and decision-making are intimately connected at a cellular level.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DECISION-MAKING

Physical health is the easiest of all categories to understand. It's visible, tangible, and objectively measurable. Whether it's the common cold, a positive COVID test, a sprained ankle, a broken arm that needs a cast, or a blood test that's crossed the threshold for a low thyroid diagnosis, these are all things we can understand, tangibly see, quantify, and treat.

But deep inside of our bodies, in the depths of our viscera, our endocrine system, and the fluids where the biochemistry responsible for sustained life is predominant over all else, our brain is getting subtle and continuous bidirectional feedback via unique nervous system connections that powerfully and subconsciously shape the content of

our minds and the choices we make. These intelligent, nonverbal biologic communication systems have evolved from the ground up, starting with our earliest ancestors here on planet earth. The information they provide, when made conscious, is nothing short of vital to both decision-making and survival.

Just as our experience of the outside world shapes our physical health (e.g., letting ourselves get run down, overdoing it, unhealthy eating, little or no movement or exercise), our inner molecular system is providing constant feedback through chemical signals designed to keep the whole system in homeostatic balance, a state of equilibrium the body constantly strives to return to, as mentioned earlier.

This means that while we may wake up with a headache, an achy back, creaky knees, or a runny nose, all which seem like “outside” issues affecting the physical body, there’s a whole microscopic world of invisible processing and signaling happening deep inside the body that in fact gave rise to these outer-facing issues.

Such nonvisible processing and messaging can unknowingly and dramatically influence how we think and feel. Biochemical signals stemming from lack of sleep or inadequate nutrition to the cells can exacerbate mental and emotional stress, fostering an inflammatory neurochemistry that can erode sound judgment. It’s hard to think clearly, not to mention make *good, thoughtful decisions*, when our bodies feel lousy. And indeed, physical health is just the tip of the iceberg in a much more intriguing, colorful, and exciting integrated story.

## **EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND DECISION-MAKING**

Lest you think of emotions as fuzzy, ephemeral, nonrelevant sensations that come and go on a whim, stay tuned, because here is what we know:

*Emotions represent critical decision-making data.*

Indeed, emotions can be just as important as fact-based information in making wise decisions, sometimes even more so. As a quick example, when one’s gut feeling says no to a decision, perhaps there’s something the conscious mind should be considering in the deliberative process.

As we will cover later in the book, emotions are distinct from feelings, but intimately related. How? *Emotions are subconscious* biochemical processes that underlie what we experience as *conscious feelings*. In other words, emotions and feelings are two sides of the very same coin. Our emotions, which have their own individualized biochemical signatures, initiate in both the viscera of the body and structures of the brain a specific molecular cocktail depending on the emotion evoked.

For example, your stomach feels tight as you think about giving an important presentation to the senior management team at your company. Your body is talking to you, expressing an emotion at a subconscious physiological level, which surfaces as the feeling of fear. And why fear? Whatever interpretation your mind has contrived regarding your presentation, it is perceived to be a threat. Put another way, our feelings and their underlying emotions simply reflect our perception of the world as we experience it. Depending on the meaning we give to any given situation, the result can be anger, joy, disgust, compassion, or hatred, and each feeling state will influence our decision-making process in a different way.

It is here that we can take concrete steps to protect our decision-making machinery by acknowledging and interpreting the feelings that are currently surfacing and by framing and reframing our perceptions of what's happening around us so that our emotional responses support sound decisions rather than against them. This understanding will be further explained in Chapter 12.

As with other areas of health, there is a continuum along which our emotions and feelings operate. In this case, while you may not be able to swing from one pole to the other (e.g. transforming massive anxiety into complete unbridled excitement), you *can* upshift your feelings to an area of greater upside with positive self-talk, like “I’ve done all I can to prepare, and yes I’m nervous, but I’ll keep breathing, approach this as a learning experience, and see what unfolds.” And by the way, this constructive inner dialogue can reduce stress and help clarify the alternatives you have before you.

Some individuals tend to be more emotionally vulnerable to the effects of their environments than others, an area of scientific study

called “biological sensitivity to context.” Those on the more sensitive side of the biological continuum are termed “orchids,” while the heartier and more resistant individuals are called “dandelions.” Have you noticed that some aren’t bothered by traffic jams, discourteous drivers, or loud noises, while others decidedly are?

Everyone is wired differently from birth, and these differences are observable at the very start, as newborns lie in their cribs in the hospital, some more sensitive to light or noise than others. These differences in sensitivity are stable and persist throughout life. This means that some people are simply more biologically susceptible to mental and emotional stress and must work more diligently to manage inner chemistry than others—or their decision-making will suffer.

It’s also important to understand that when our emotional chemistry is primarily generated by negative life events, over time the molecular cocktail of stress biochemicals, if not offset by positive emotion, can seriously compromise our health and good judgment. Just consider how feeling sustained low motivation and resentment can result in a kind of cognitive fog that fosters careless errors, impulsivity, and, most importantly, bad choices.

**Wise Decision Insight:** The choices we make can be profoundly influenced by our current emotional state via molecular processes residing deep below the surface and hidden from view, for better or worse. The solution: *Do everything possible to constructively alter a dysfunctional emotional state before making important decisions.*

## MENTAL HEALTH AND DECISION-MAKING

While the stigma regarding mental health is slowly waning, and rightfully so, we have a very long way to go as global citizens to establish programs and systems that support the prevention and treatment of mental health issues. From a scientific perspective, mental wellness should be prioritized and valued equally to taking our child to the pediatrician for a bacterial infection or sprained ankle, or being disciplined about making our own annual adult visit to the internist, if for no other reason than to set the stage for sound decision-making throughout life.

To reiterate, the very same chemicals that contribute to vibrant emotional health are the same ones that contribute to vibrant mental health, just further upstream. Well-managed mental health is a *significant* contributor to wise decision-making. Depression, panic disorders, chronic anxiety, and all forms of mental unwellness are simply signals that the mind-body system is out of balance and something needs to be adjusted to remediate the issue or the decision-making process can be seriously derailed. If decisions must be made while feeling mentally unwell, a brief bout of physical exercise, a walk outside in nature, an oxytocin-producing conversation with a wise and trusted friend, slow and deep breathing, a kindness meditation, and the like can add immeasurable short-term clarity in your effort to make the right choice.

Much of what we suffer from today—specifically anxiety and depression as the two largest categories of mental unwellness—is capable of completely sabotaging how we think about the choices we make. Understanding how basic things like getting adequate sleep, exercise, eating healthy food, practicing mindfulness, spending time in nature, and investing energy in high-quality relationships can be leveraged to elevate mental clarity and more grounded, reality-based thinking represents a critical *mental* decision-making insight.

Any strategy that gives rise to a more clear-headed, mentally focused, fully engaged sense of confidence and competence, even if only short term, should be given serious consideration. Anything that helps get one's mental thinking firmly on the solid ground, to mentally deal with, in the words of Shakespeare, life's "slings and arrows" *before critical decisions are made* must be considered.

In summary, what affects one biochemical element of our mind-body system inherently cascades through all the others and can take place in the blink of an eye or, in some cases, very slowly. What matters most is that when the right biochemical agents are released at the right time and in the right amount, the result is the ideal recipe for balanced, thoughtful decisions. And what's exciting in this understanding is that we can exert considerable influence over the timing and concentrations of those chemical ingredients with proper training and preparation. For example, realizing the importance of the decisions you will be making tomorrow, your inner voice (your Y.O.D.A.) might send the following coaching advice:

*“No impulsive drive-through dinner for me tonight, I’ll go home and prepare a healthy dinner and get a good night’s sleep. On the new job decision, I’ll ask for the time I need to think it through and get as much input as I can to clarify the risk-reward. I will make the decision when I am calm, rested, and mentally prepared.”*

## **SPIRITUAL HEALTH AND DECISION-MAKING**

Now that we’ve covered three of the four mind-body dimensions of health, we’re ready to cover the big one. This is the dimension of *spiritual health*, the major higher-order driver of who we are, what we stand for, and who we ultimately become.

All energy systems inherently gravitate toward *entropy*, defined as a gradual decline in order and organization, or conversely a slow descent into chaos and disorder. Spirituality, for reasons related to having a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself and a connection to other human beings, helps prevent individuals from feeling a sense of hopelessness and isolation. Research shows that isolation, being and feeling alone, is as harmful to one’s health, by virtue of the very same molecules described earlier, as being obese or smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

Put simply, spiritual energy, which at its core is purpose, is the ordering force in the energy system of human existence. Having a clear sense of purpose, values, and beliefs organizes, coordinates, and streamlines human energy rather than allowing it to gravitate toward chaos and disorder.

While spirituality is often thought of as an individual’s religious beliefs, it is technically defined as relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material things. It’s interesting that spirituality has rarely been linked to the topic of overall health, both in everyday conversation and in scientific research. This understanding, however, is starting to change. What we now know is that spiritual experiences center our biochemistry via the very same mechanisms that drive our mental, physical, and emotional health.

**Wise Decision Insight:** The brain’s processing of spiritually driven thoughts, ideas, and experiences gives rise to health-promoting biochemical ingredients in the mind-body system that are essential to wise and timeless decisions.



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*“When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bounds. Your mind transcends limitations. Your consciousness expands in every direction.”*

—Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

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In summary, human beings are complex, multidimensional energy systems. One’s highest beliefs, purpose, values, and connection with others energize the brain and body in ways that promote health at a molecular level and, equally important, serve to align our decisions with our highest priorities in life. The spiritual dimension represents the ordering force in determining what matters most to us in life. As such, spiritual insights play a critical role in our ability to look back in time and say, “I’d make that same decision again today given the same circumstances.” When that happens, we know we’ve made the right decision.

**Wise Decision Insight:** To ensure our most important decisions in life are fully aligned with our deepest values and purpose, our spiritual dimension, it’s vital to spell out, in the clearest terms possible, what our core purpose, values, and beliefs are in order to properly equip our inner decision-making advisor (Y.O.D.A.) with the required navigational coordinates.

## Y.O.D.A.

We can think of your Y.O.D.A. (Your Own Decision Advisor) as a set of metaphorical bumpers that keep your life decisions in the bowl-able part of the lane. There is some degree of flexibility on the trajectory of the ball, yet the bumpers provide protection from getting sidelined into the dead-end drain of the alley before even having a shot at knocking down any of the pins.

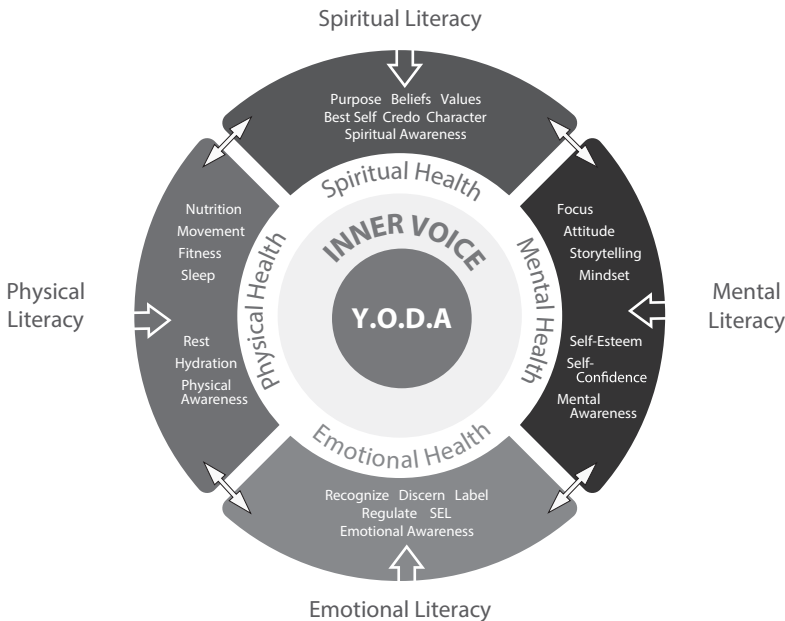
In other words, if the ultimate goal is a strike, where all 10 pins go down, and the worst-case scenario is a scratch, wouldn’t you prefer to knock down even one or two, a decision that perpetuates momentum in the right direction? This provides an opportunity to bowl a spare,

eliminating the rest of the pins on the second go-around, and is, by a wide margin, a lower-risk and higher-reward strategy.

Let’s face it, hitting a perfect strike 100% of the time, in bowling or in life, is a low-odds bet. But aiming for gradual progress, fine-tuning your decision-making skills, is highly reasonable and rational. And in the end, wouldn’t you prefer slow, steady progress, a few pins at a time, to being *out of the game* before even having the opportunity to score a point?

The objective of this chapter has been to provide clear insight into the vital link between physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health and sound decision-making, with the goal of being able to actively and intentionally engage in building adaptive habits and behaviors that support your multidimensional health. (See Figure 1.2.)

Later chapters will outline the details for creating your Y.O.D.A. roadmap, complete with operating instructions and written exercises, all designed to most effectively and efficiently discern the elements of central importance to you, to keep you out of the alleys and in the lane, building and fortifying your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual literacy muscles with every decision you make.



**Figure 1.2 Health ignites wisdom in decision-making.**