

Opinion: How mindfulness can help you make better life choices

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Mindfulness could help you to make hard choices. Credit: dotshock/Shutterstock

One of the most important events in the British education calendar is approaching: A-level results day. Beyond A-levels, choosing what you want to do, or what you want to study are two of the big decisions in life.

And, as such, they are not easy ones to make. You weigh up alternative options, and find a good number of reasons behind each of them. Many in the Twittersphere are already reliving their own results day memories with one user [saying](#): "Aaaah I remember #Alevelresults day. Led me to a glittering English Literature degree which is why I work in IT".

[Philosopher Ruth Chang](#) – who studied law, but then switched to philosophy – has dedicated her life to the study of hard choices. She explains that when it comes to making difficult decisions, it is often not about which alternative is better, because there is no such alternative.

You might be scratching your head at this point, but just bear with me, because Chang's philosophy is a good one. The idea is that if you are free from the illusion of a "correct" and an "incorrect" answer, you can more easily make choices in line with an outcome that is more important to you – enabling you to become the kind of person that you want to be. And it's in this nebulous space of hard choices, that we can be the authors of our own life.

This doesn't really make the decision any easier, but at least it makes things much more interesting. Because, it doesn't really matter what you choose, but how you choose it. And this should be done reflectively, slowly, wholeheartedly. Definitely not as a knee-jerk reaction – not in denial, and I hope not out of panic.

Who do you want to be?

To work out which choice is right for you, you first need to decide who you want to be, and to do that, you need to know who you are – which requires careful self-observation. If you have ever tried to [practice meditation or mindfulness](#) you might have noticed how difficult it is to watch your own breath without trying to change it. But difficult as it may be, these types of exercises – which involve paying attention to the

[present moment](#) on purpose and non-judgmentally – can help with (self) observation.

Recent studies show that mindfulness meditation can be [effective](#) at reducing anxiety and depression, [because](#) it reduces our tendency to react to situations without thinking, and increases our self-compassion. Mindfulness exercises facilitate our awareness of the space between a "trigger" and our response to it. They also train us in bringing our attention back to the present moment after our mind has wandered, without criticising ourselves.

With lower reactivity and higher self-compassion it is easier to explore chains of thought, emotions and sensations without immediately trying to condemn, suppress, or change them. And this carefree exploration may even help new insights to develop and change your perspective on a situation.

If you get to know yourself better, you'll find it easier to see which things you value and enjoy most – and what you care most about. You'll be able to come up with new plans that are aligned with these things, integrating your past, present and future – to create your own meaningful story.

So even if the career you so passionately want to do typically leads to unstable employment, which your parents have warned you off, but you know that you value passion above financial stability and feel able to manage uncertainty, then that career may be your best option. You may instead prefer an easy and predictable professional life. Or you might realise through being a bit more self-aware that your real interests lie outside your career – it's all there to be discovered.

Mindful living

When I learnt meditation I embarked in a deep inner exploration that helped me to see what was important for me, and gave me the courage to go after my dreams. However, mindfulness should not be viewed as an answer for every problem. It is not easy, it requires regular practice, and [not everyone likes it or benefits from it](#). Indeed, there are other ways of effectively exploring the inner self, managing emotions and maintaining a mindful attitude to life. But, at least for some, [mindfulness meditation](#) can be a great ally when it comes to making important decisions.

Developing your career can be a fantastic experience if you have chosen it wholeheartedly, even in spite of all the challenges that lie ahead. Essential to this is living in a less automatic way, reminding yourself of why you have chosen this path, and taking up the challenges with some sporting spirit, even if they end up in a career switch.

The very fact that some of us are able to choose what to do in life, try a path, and have some degree of support if we fail is still, unfortunately, a rare privilege. So if we don't take the risk and go after our dreams, who will? After all, as a friend of mine once said: "Life is the art of doing things for which you are never prepared enough."

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