



SELF-DIRECTED TOOLKIT

Decision-Making Under Stress

TOOLKIT: Decision-Making Under Stress - A Relational Guide

Practical Exercises for Stress & Decision-Making

A guided set of exercises to help you recognize stress states, slow down reactivity, and make more grounded, values-aligned decisions.

How to Use This Guide

Use these exercises in the moment (when stress is high) or as a weekly practice. You don't need to do all of them; start with one or two that feel most relevant.

1. The State Check-In (2-3 minutes)

Purpose: Build awareness of your internal state before making decisions.

Ask yourself:

- What am I feeling right now?
- Where do I feel it in my body?
- Am I rushed, pressured, or overwhelmed?
- On a scale of 1-10, how activated am I?

Reframe: Instead of “What should I do?” → ask “What state am I in?”

Notes:

2. Name the Pattern

Purpose: Identify your default stress-response pattern.

When stressed, I tend to:

- Avoid
- React quickly
- Overthink
- People-please
- Shut down
- Other: _____

Reflection: What decisions do I typically make from this state?

Notes:

3. The 90-Second Pause

Purpose: Interrupt reactivity and allow your nervous system to settle.

Steps:

1. Pause before responding
2. Take slow breaths (in for 4, out for 6)
3. Relax your shoulders and jaw
4. Remind yourself: "I don't have to decide this right now."

Note: Even a short pause can shift brain functioning.

Notes:

4. Ground Before You Decide

Purpose: Reconnect thinking and feeling systems.

Try one:

- Put your feet firmly on the ground
- Hold something cold or textured
- Look around and name 5 things you see
- Step outside for fresh air

Prompt: Do I feel even slightly more settled than before?

Notes:

5. 'Future You' Check

Purpose: Shift from short-term relief to long-term alignment.

Ask:

- How will I feel about this decision tomorrow?
- Does this move me toward or away from what matters?
- Am I choosing relief or alignment?

Notes:

6. Values Anchor

Purpose: Make decisions based on who you want to be, not just how you feel.

Complete:

- The kind of person I want to be in this moment is: _____
- A small step in that direction would be: _____

Notes:

7. For Parents: Co-regulation in Action

Purpose: Support teens whose decision-making is impacted by stress.

Instead of:

- “Why would you do that?”

Try:

- “Hey, I can see this is a lot right now.”
- “Let’s slow this down together.”
- “We can figure this out when things feel calmer.”

Focus: Connection before correction.

Notes:

8. Repair, Not Perfection

Purpose: Reduce shame and build resilience.

Reflect:

- What happened?
- What state was I in?
- What would I try differently next time?

Reminder: Better decisions come from practice, not perfection.

Notes:

Weekly Integration Practice

Once a week, reflect on:

- A decision you made under stress
- What state you were in
- What helped (or would have helped)

Write 2–3 sentences. Keep it simple.

Notes:

Final Note

You don't need to eliminate stress to make better decisions. You need tools to recognize when stress is shaping your choices, and the capacity to pause, reconnect, and respond differently.

Support

If you want deeper support:

- Explore more resources on the blog
- Download additional tools
- Consider 1:1 relational therapy to build these skills in real time

You don't have to figure this out alone.



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