



Decision-Making for ADHD Brains

A simple framework for choosing without spiralling.

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

A steady orientation

This is not a decision-optimisation system.
It's not about making the *best* choice.
It's not here to speed you up or push you through discomfort.

This guide exists because many ADHD and AuDHD people don't struggle with *thinking*...
they struggle with **choosing under load**.

If decisions:

- spiral
- stall
- feel disproportionately heavy
- trigger shame, panic, or avoidance

...that's not a personal flaw.
It's a nervous system reality.

You don't need to read this in order.
You don't need to use every part.
Choosing *later* is still choosing.

1. Why decision-making is hard for ADHD brains

Decision-making is often framed as a cognitive skill.

In reality, it's a **state-dependent function**.

For many ADHD brains, decisions become difficult when:

- there are too many variables
- outcomes feel emotionally loaded
- information is incomplete
- consequences feel irreversible
- you're already low on capacity

The brain doesn't just weigh options.
It also asks, quietly:

"Is this safe enough to choose?"

When the answer is unclear, the system stalls.

2. Decision paralysis is not indecision... it's overload

What gets called “indecisiveness” is often:

- too many options arriving at once
- too much imagined future consequence
- too much pressure to choose *correctly*
- too little safety to tolerate uncertainty

Your nervous system doesn't freeze because it can't decide.

It freezes because:

Choosing feels too costly right now.

Stopping is a form of protection.

3. Why ADHD brains spiral instead of settling

Many ADHD brains are:

- associative (everything connects to everything)
- future-projecting (rapidly imagining outcomes)
- sensitive to regret, failure, or missed potential

So one decision can quickly turn into:

- ten imagined futures
- moral pressure (“I should know this”)
- self-comparison
- fear of closing doors

The spiral isn't drama.

It's **too much processing without enough containment.**

4. A key reframe: most decisions are not permanent

When you're spiralling, your system often treats the decision as:

- final
- identity-defining
- high-stakes

But many decisions are actually:

- adjustable
- reversible
- informational rather than defining

Before choosing, it can help to ask:

“Is this a door, or a path?”

- A **door** closes something permanently (rare).
- A **path** can be adjusted as you walk (common).

Most everyday decisions are paths...
but they don't feel that way under pressure.

5. The regulation-first rule

If you're highly activated or shut down, decision quality drops.

Not because you're bad at deciding...
but because the system is prioritising safety.

Before deciding, it can help to ask:

“Is my nervous system available for this right now?”

If the answer is no, the most regulated choice may be:

- postponing
- reducing the decision
- choosing temporarily
- asking for more time

Delaying a decision is not avoidance
if it prevents harm.

6. The ADHD-friendly decision framework

(simple, not exhaustive)

Instead of analysing everything, try this **four-step orientation**.

You don't need to write it down.
You can answer in your head... or not at all.

Step 1: What *kind* of decision is this?

Not *what* decision... but *what type*.

Is it:

- low-stakes / reversible
- medium-stakes
- high-stakes / hard to undo

If it's low-stakes, it doesn't deserve high-stakes processing.

Over-processing small decisions drains capacity fast.

Step 2: What does my nervous system need *before* choosing?

Common needs include:

- more information
- less pressure
- reassurance
- rest
- containment ("I don't have to decide perfectly")

If you try to decide *without meeting this need*, spiralling is likely.

Meeting the need is part of the decision process.

Step 3: What option reduces harm *right now*?

Instead of asking:

"What's the best choice long-term?"

Try:

"What choice is least harmful to my nervous system today?"

This might mean:

- choosing the simpler option
- choosing the reversible option
- choosing rest

- choosing “not yet”

This is not short-sighted.

It's **capacity-aware**.

Step 4: What's a “good enough” choice?

Perfection keeps ADHD brains stuck.

You might ask:

“What choice would be acceptable, even if imperfect?”

“Good enough” choices:

- preserve energy
- allow learning
- keep you moving
- reduce shame

You can revise later.

7. When choosing feels impossible

Sometimes the system is so overloaded that **any choice feels wrong**.

Signs include:

- dread at all options
- urge to escape the decision entirely
- looping thoughts
- physical shutdown

In these moments, the most regulated move is often:

- reducing the decision to the smallest possible version
- choosing temporarily
- handing the decision to future-you
- asking someone else to hold it with you

Needing help deciding is not incompetence.

It's **co-regulation**.

8. What usually makes decision-making worse

(quietly, consistently)

Spirals intensify when:

- you believe you must decide alone
- time pressure is artificial but feels real
- you're criticised for past choices
- mistakes are moralised
- rest is framed as avoidance

These conditions would destabilise *any* nervous system.

They hit ADHD systems harder because processing is already intense.

9. Why clarity often comes *after* choosing

Many ADHD people wait for clarity *before* acting.

But for ADHD brains:

- clarity often arrives **through movement**
- information appears after engagement
- certainty follows experience, not thought

This doesn't mean acting recklessly.

It means recognising that:

Not all clarity is available upfront.

Sometimes choosing *is how clarity emerges*.

10. If decision paralysis is a pattern

Frequent decision spirals often point to:

- chronic overwhelm
- too many open loops
- environments with high evaluation
- lack of psychological safety

- pressure to choose “correctly”

This is not a personal deficit.

It’s a **system that demands certainty from a brain wired for exploration.**

Changing the environment often helps more than changing the person.

11. A gentle decision reset (optional)

If you want a simple pause point, you might try:

- **Right now, this decision feels:**
- **The part that feels heaviest is:**
- **One way to reduce the weight is:**
- **A reversible or temporary choice could be:**

Answering one line is enough.

12. What counts as a successful decision

Success is **not**:

- zero doubt
- perfect outcomes
- never revising

Success *is*:

- choosing without self-attack
- preserving capacity
- learning from experience
- staying connected to yourself

You’re allowed to change your mind.

That’s not failure...
it’s responsiveness.

A closing permission

You are not bad at decisions.

You are navigating choices with:

- a fast, associative mind
- a sensitive nervous system
- real consequences
- fluctuating capacity

You are allowed to:

- choose slowly
- choose temporarily
- choose support
- choose rest
- choose “good enough”

This framework isn't here to make you decisive.

It's here to help you choose **without losing yourself in the process.**

Use what fits.
Leave the rest.

