Every day we are bombarded with choices, decisions we need to make. Some are seemingly insignificant and yet can seem incredibly daunting. Some are life-changing.

Growing up, I was not aware of the impact of my decisions in the short or long term. I made most of my decisions without much thought. As I grew up, I started to recognize that my choices did matter, and it became an absolute struggle to make even the simplest decision.

There were times when I was with my friend at the store and we were trying to decide which chips we wanted for movie night. My friend would ask me, “well, what do you want?” and I would say, “Oh, whatever you want.” I did not want to own the decision. I was fearful that whatever choice I made it was going to be wrong. I had been told over and over again that my choices were not right, that they were not best. Someone else always knew better.

I was 17 years old the first time I made a choice that I felt was my own. It was the first time that I felt like someone had sat down and listened to me explain why I was making a choice, my awareness of the potential consequences, and my plans on how to deal with them if they occurred.

I was sitting in the vice-principal’s office, a spot that I had visited quite often, listening to him talk about my poor attendance. He was talking about how if I did not improve my attendance, I was not going to pass any of my classes. We were only a little over a month into my senior year at school, and I had already missed more than half of the days.

Stuff at home was chaotic, and I was not overly concerned with something that seemed as trivial as high school. I told him that I would just drop out. There was no need for me to be there. I was old enough to make the choice as long as one of my parents consented and signed the paperwork.

He gave me the paperwork and an incredible lecture about the importance of education. He pleaded with me to change my decision. We set up an appointment to meet a few days later so that he could meet with my mom and me to discuss the matter. I went home quite proud of myself.

Most of the people I was hanging out with were high school drop-outs, and they seemed pretty happy. I told myself that I would be happy if I could hang out with them all day. Instead, I ended up keeping myself locked in my room.

That time of my life was pretty depressing, and I always felt alone even when around other people. This was around the time that my …..

Continued on page 5
**Riddle**
*By Bill Storer*

Sometimes it is so small you can hardly see it and, at the same time, it is the largest thing in the world.

At times, you can feel it is not to be found, but it is so close that it can not be any closer.

Others may try to give it to you, but you have to find it for yourself.

Once it is planted you can watch it grow. You can even feel it growing.

Before it is finished growing you want to hold onto it and keep holding on to it as it grows even larger. Everyone has it; it comes in all sizes. Once yours has grown, you can give it to others so that they can grow some as well, and it can spread like seeds in a garden.

I hope everyone grows.

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**A Choice in Suffering?**
*By Miranda Rylance-Rice*

Perhaps the true meaningful choices in life are made and acted upon in the mind?

Perhaps one need not pray to avoid suffering but rather, pray that they be able to endure their suffering in the most facile and peaceful way possible?

It has been said that reality is a construction of the mind. If this is true, then is not suffering a mental construct? A construct for which we act as a personal God? Able to decide contextual appropriateness? Texture? Taste? Smell?

If this were so, that reality were nothing but a perceptual construct, then would it not be possible to ease through it in an unobstructed way? Is perhaps, the most meaningful choice a decision of acceptance? Acceptance of self and other as though they were one?

This is my meaningful choice. My choice is to accept all as though it were nothing.

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**Meaningful Choice**
*By Lisa Cousineau*

Choosing our own destiny in a meaningful way gives us the dignity to learn from the risks we take in life just as others do.

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**Tears**
*Submitted By Gina Trinh  
Author Unknown*

Like rain is to nature  
Tears are to life.  
Rain softens the earth.  
Tears soften strife.

Crying is a release,  
There is no blame.  
In showing emotions,  
There is no shame.

Be they of joy.  
Be they of sorrow.  
Tears ease today,  
They strengthen tomorrow.

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**A Sonnet to Generalized Anxiety Disorder**
*By Keehan Koorn*

My personality was once defined  
By nervousness, perfectionism, fear.  
My mom said that’s the way God made my mind  
My imperfection always would be clear.  
Then, diagnosed with GAD, I learned  
My mind was hijacked by an illness all  
This time! I had a choice to change! I burned  
To liberate the Me still under thrall.

I watched my feelings, thoughts, however mild,  
Discerning what was Me and what was it.  
I learned it’s like the wind or like a child,  
Attempts to stop it never conquer it.  
But, harnessed, wind runs turbines, flies a kite—  
I choose to harness GAD, not fight.
Volunteering with Self Help

Making the decision to volunteer can be a great way to get involved in the community, to have meaningful activity in your life, and to use your lived experience to facilitate others as they begin driving on the road to recovery.

Volunteering to offer Peer Support involves:

- Listening to and validating the lived experiences of others.
- Establishing a relationship built on trust and common experience.
- Sharing mutual experience regarding mental health and addictions.
- Assisting others in identifying ways to improve their quality of life by selecting needs and setting goals.
- Assisting others in viewing experiences differently, with hope and self-determination.

Please contact your local Site Facilitator to discuss, and/or apply for Volunteer opportunities at Self Help Alliance.

ASK REEVES

By Paul Reeve

A meaningful choice comes from and is defined by you.

I have been in many situations involving family members and service providers telling people what their choices are; this is okay to a point but not the final decision.

A patient in a psychiatric hospital called me for help—they wanted the help of a psychologist and offered to pay all the costs. The psychiatrist at the hospital said that seeing a psychologist would not be cost-effective and could interfere with the person’s care. After some negotiations the person was permitted the service they requested.

Does anyone but you know what’s best for you?

Knowing what you need and want is important and takes effort on your part. Question the options presented to you. Ask yourself, “do I want this?” As I’ve written in the past, “you are the expert on you.” Other people’s opinions can be helpful, but it is you who lives with the consequences of your choices.

It helps to think outside the conventional box. There may not be an obvious answer in the moment so you may need to get creative. You may want to ask people you trust to help with this process.

There is a story about a person who was told that, for the rest of their life, the choices of ice-cream flavors would be limited to chocolate, vanilla or strawberry. One day a friend took the person to a store that had over 50 flavors to choose from, and because of this, the person’s life became richer.

In the short-term you may choose to focus on the smaller goals, like just getting your feet on the ground and taking small steps forward, but don’t forget to think about your long-term needs as well. Remember that the decisions you make can have long-lasting effects so take the time you need to choose wisely.

A person was depressed and off work for several months. When considering the employee’s return, the employer stated it would be best if the person went to a different job. In addition, the Union suggested that the employee might feel “uncomfortable” returning to the same job site and recommended that he/she be moved to a different location. The person wanted to get back to their old job at their old location. It took the threat and possibility of a human-rights case to return the person to their old job.

Don’t settle for someone else’s choice.

Think big for your life. Challenge yourself to consider all of your options and to explore what could be most helpful to you. Don’t be limited by what others tell you. Search for what you want. It’s out there.

If you have advocacy questions or you would like to submit to “Ask Reeves” contact Paul Reeve, Advocacy Coordinator, directly at 519.763.4014 x 202, toll free 1.888.255.2642 x 202, or email reevep@self-help.ca. If you do not see your questions in print, please note Paul responds to all questions on an individual basis.
Tips for Coping with Feelings
Submitted by Brenda Richard

Tips for Coping with Feelings

1. Take deep breaths accompanied by thoughts of being in control of your feelings.
2. Tense the large muscles of the body and then relax them.
3. Set small goals and break tasks into smaller more manageable chunks (to help relieve stress). Allow plenty of time to complete each small goal. Being too busy is a big source of stress.
4. Exercise and eat regular meals.
5. Focus on the things that you can control and let go of the things that you cannot control.
6. Rehearse and practice feared situations (helps with anxiety).
7. Talk about problems with others, including parents, older adults and friends.
8. Lower unrealistic expectations.
9. Schedule breaks and enjoyable activities like music, art, sports and hanging out with friends.
10. Accept yourself as you are and work towards identifying your strengths (realize that no one is perfect).
11. Get plenty of rest.
12. Don’t be scared to ask for help if your feelings are getting out of control.

Why is self-esteem so important?

Positive self-esteem gives you the courage to be your own person, believe in your own values and make the best decision for you when the pressure is on.

How do you get self-esteem?

1. Set realistic goals for yourself.
2. Try to get the most out of your strengths and do your best without demanding unrealistic results of yourself.
3. Celebrate achievements.
4. Trust your own feelings.
5. Take it one day at a time.
6. Do your best each day.
7. Be honest with yourself.

Try to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Don’t beat yourself up over your weaknesses.

Don’t compare yourself to others. It may be hard to do sometimes but accept yourself for who you are.


Meaningful Choices
By Miranda Rylance-Rice

1. The choice to connect with others.
2. The choice to love.
3. The choice to learn.
4. The choice to heal.
5. The choice to have fun.
6. The choice to act with kindness towards yourself and others.
7. The choice to be mindful.
8. The choice to compromise.
9. The choice to change.
10. The choice to accept.
11. The choice to empathize.
12. The choice to listen.
Panic, anxiety and depression were taking over and clenching my life like an iron fist.

I understood the importance of having an education but I could not physically go to school. I could barely get out of my bed. I could not focus on anything as silly as homework and lessons being taught. Even when I did make it to school, enduring the hours of bullying and fighting was too much to deal with. I was not able to leave home, but I was able to leave school.

I knew that I needed to get one of my parents on my side. My mom was my primary care provider and was caught up in her own life. I knew everything that I needed to do to manipulate her into seeing my choice was the right one. I could promise to attend the alternative school and go back to my regular school for the second semester. I also pointed out how much more I would be able to help out around the house. My suggestions had the desired effect and my mom was board. Telling my dad was a little bit harder but my mom had already agreed. I pulled the same stunt on him and was apparently incredibly convincing because he agreed.

When my mom and I met with the vice-principal again it was a breeze. I had already practiced my speech on my mom and dad so I was pretty confident in it. The feeling of control that I had over being able to make this choice, my own choice, gave me a boost of confidence. I knew that he was disappointed but he too seemed to buy into my act of, “I just need some time to deal with some issues. I’ll go to an alternative school and complete the courses I need and I’ll be back in January.”

This was my first experience with making a choice for myself. Of having the options laid out and discussed, of looking at all of the risks (which included: no prom, no graduation, cutting myself off from some of my friends and, potentially having great difficulty finding work) and still being able to make the choice that felt right for me.

My choice did not go as I thought it would. Deep down, I wanted to believe the lines that I was feeding to everyone—that I was going to attend the alternative school and complete my classes so that I could return in January, go to prom and graduate alongside the friends that I had. I was not just trying to convince everyone else, I was trying to convince myself.

I went to the alternative school for all of one class. I also completed a couple of courses through correspondence and did really well. I never went back to my high school. I did not go to prom. I did not graduate.

My choice led me to a roller-coaster of incredibly significant choices that I had to make, the most significant of them being to reach out for help. Having made a choice allowed me to believe that I could make my own choices about my life.

By leaving high school, and not progressing as I had planned, I ended up in a situation where I was called out for my “negative” choices which led me to look at myself and finally say that something was not quite right. I stood up for myself. I said that I needed a counselor and I got one. Together, my family doctor, my counselor and I put a name to the things that I was feeling and created an action plan for overcoming them.

For 8 years I had been struggling, feeling alone, not good enough and trapped. I took control, reached out, admitted that there was a challenge and worked to overcome it. I did go on to complete my G.E.D., to graduate from college, to find a career that I love and to have my own family. It is not always easy but it is my life and I have the power to make my own choices.

By Kayleigh Hilborn

You always do what you want to do. This is true with every act.
You may say that you had to do something, or that you were forced to, but actually, whatever you do, you do by choice.
Only you have the power to choose for yourself.

~ W. Clement Stone

Every choice you make has an end result.

~ Zig Ziglar
Meaningful Choices—Meeting with Friends

Do We Always Have a Choice?

By Brenda Richard

I was once told that people always have a choice; that we choose the paths we follow in life; that we can choose whether to move forward or to remain situated in our current lifestyle and not move forward at all; that how we lay out every aspect of our journey through life is our choice. In other words, we can choose how successful we would like to be, what goals we would like to accomplish, how far we want to grow personally as an individual. We can choose how we treat others and how we let what others say affect us. We even have a choice as to what kind of day we would like to have when we get up in the morning.

How could this be possible I thought? I don’t always have a choice! My mood when I get up in the morning determines my day, my finances determine what I can and cannot afford and, when it comes to my personality, I am who I am. I didn’t feel I had choices in any of these situations. Instead, I felt that my lifestyle had just unfolded and that it was what it was; that my choices were already made for me and I had no control over them.

During my recovery I reflected back on the life that I had been living up to that point. I remember feeling frustrated, miserable and moody the majority of the time. I was nervous, full of anxiety and could never relax. I avoided people and held grudges when they spoke negatively about me. I talked and criticized people behind their back. I resented them when I couldn’t say no to them. I felt unhappy and stuck in a place where there was no hope of improving my quality of life in site.

On my journey, I discovered that I could make a choice to spend time developing my own personal growth. I explored ways to change my lifestyle and the unhealthy choices I was making in life. I chose to move forward into a lifestyle made up of healthy choices made on my own; choices that felt right for me as an individual.

I educated myself on how to make healthier and more meaningful choices that would benefit my well-being and quality of life. I learned how to build healthy relationships; set limits and boundaries; communicate more openly; express my emotions; be assertive; say no without carrying...
the burden of guilt, and to be totally honest and truthful with myself. I learned to let go of my anger and stop repressing it, since repressing anger only leads to illness. I developed a skill for listening to what my body was telling me physically and mentally. I now choose my personal health over stress and follow through on the decisions I make. All this took time and practice but proved to be some of the most meaningful choices I have made for myself in life.

Therefore, and in answer to the above question, I discovered that ‘yes’ we do always have a choice as to the decisions we make for ourselves in life. I have found a healthy balance in my life since I began making meaningful choices. I feel good making choices that are right for me. I am happier and healthier overall. I now treat others how I would like to be treated by modeling the choices that I have made through my behavior.  

By Brenda Richard

Symbols of Choice

Chinese Character for Choice

Words of Meaningful Choice

- Options
- Pro
- Alternatives
- Strength
- Decision
- Empowerment
- Con
- Awareness
- Mindfulness
- Selection
- Informed
- Choice
We Want to Hear From You!

Send along your articles, images, letters to the editor, comments or views about topics in this newsletter or other topics related to the mental health system. Please note that any items submitted may be edited for space and other needs of the “Changing Lives Newsletter.”

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