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leader in growth and development of the worksite health and well-being movement. The decision weighed on me for weeks. Not in a heavy, unruly-to-sort-out way. Rather, I was being deliberative about what Bill Miller, co-creator of Motivational Interviewing (MI), calls “decision balance.” I was also mindful of Jim Prochaska’s findings that the pros of a choice usually need to far outweigh the cons to lead to sustainable change. (Interviews and a webinar with Prochaska and Miller are in References on the next page.) Add to these thoughts all the workaday emotional factors like loyalty, friendship, gratitude, uncertainty, and curiosity — and making a job change decision can become immobilizing. It’s no wonder “deciding not to decide” is such a popular choice.

## Changing a Life

As health coaches, we listen for “change talk.” It’s that simmering brew of words from our clients that tell us they are mentally percolating over how their lives would look different, quite

# Life Choices and the Wonders of Advice

...by Paul Terry

Decisions change lives... and the work of health promotion is steeped in the science and art of triggering and supporting choices that make lives better. It’s been said that we make about 35,000 decisions a day. Obviously, we don’t make time to ponder most choices too deeply. Should I go to work today? Should I brush my teeth this morning? Kiss my sweetheart goodbye? Thousands of our decisions have been premeditated, and today’s choices are merely a matter of execution. Accordingly, most are a rapid mix of logic, impulse and, very often, habit. We act automatically and live with these decisions. Those of you who are parents are likely coming to terms with how much you sound like your own parents as you offer your kids timeless bromides about “choosing wisely.” As our decisions mount into the millions, we become more mindful, but sadly, also more inured to the fact that choices have consequences.

This column falls on the month that I’ve started a new job as President and CEO of HERO, the Health Enhancement Research Organization, a national think tank dedicated to advancing best practices in employee health promotion. I’m totally jazzed for the opportunity here, but it was challenging to leave behind a fabulous job with StayWell, a prominent

thing that organization has done, but you’re ready to run through a wall for them.

- **Tinker relentlessly.** If they hit a grand slam that sails out of the ballpark, you’d think they would take the same approach the next time they step to the plate. Not the best of the best. In fact, “that’s the way we’ve always done it” isn’t in their vocabulary because they almost never do something exactly the same a second time. There’s always some part they can do better, aim higher, achieve more. They’re pleased, but never completely satisfied with success.
- **Teach, coach, mentor, pass it on.** The great wellness leaders have an almost unlimited capacity to help others achieve their highest professional goals — whether they’re a direct report or the boss. It’s an unforced desire to help others who want to learn and grow.
- **Seek out the best advice and information for the situation.** Often they’ll have a trusted mentor or several seasoned advisers, but they analyze the need or obstacle and are completely comfortable going outside their established network to get the right input for the challenge at hand.
- **Live the life they want.** Some might be defined as workaholics by those who don’t know them, while others seem not to be trying at all — their success appears almost effortless. In both instances — and everything in between — the great ones have achieved the right balance for themselves and are not trying to fit some corporate definition of a hard-charging executive.

Take time today to consider how you can apply these attributes. 🇺🇸

possibly better, if they made some new choices. Indeed, Motivational Interviewing involves eliciting change talk. It is usually through open-ended questions and techniques like “amplified reflection” that we shine a light on stated values and incongruent

landed on decision making as a topic worthy of the full immersion and deep exploration that book writing demands. To be sure, decision making and health are intimate partners who squabble and make amends incessantly.

There are countless ways to make good decisions. I’ve been fortunate to learn that the simple but powerful act of asking friends for advice can be life changing. 📖

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choices. While I agree Motivational Interviewing is largely effective to the extent that it avoids being prescriptive, I’ve also felt that inexperienced coaches too often miss those occasional moments when the simple act of giving advice is just what’s needed. For me and my recent work life decision making, it was 2 astute, reliable friends willing to render opinions who changed my life:

- In the first encounter, I shared a doubt I was having and it was lovingly laid to rest. My friend had experienced just such a work-related issue, and advice came by way of heartfelt personal disclosure about how the issue had been reconciled.
- I brought a different question I felt stuck on to another friend who quickly and resolutely shot it down. “That’s not the right question,” my friend said firmly and went on to explain why I should let that one go. Directive and prescriptive? Yes. Even paternalistic? I suppose. Helpful in my decision making nonetheless? Absolutely.

## Making Decisions

As I’ve considered whether I want to publish another book, I’ve often

That alone makes it fun and interesting to study. What’s more, forging good choices is a complex mix of psychology, philosophy, and culture. These big disciplines play to concepts I’ve enjoyed studying in the past such as locus of control, consumer decision support, mastery, leadership, followership, appreciative inquiry, and values clarification. Decisions also give a nod to ideological precepts like predestination, your “soul’s code” and, ultimately, the meaning of your life.

As much as these issues were flowing in the river that ran through my decision to accept the HERO job, in the end, the same pros stood out that have guided my job choices in the past: mission, fit, the chance to serve, and the promise of a new adventure. Now I can say without reservation that I hold the best job a health educator could ever ask for in the entire world. But, truth be told, I’ve said that with equal enthusiasm about every job I’ve held throughout my career. And, yes, cognitive dissonance is another of those issues that makes decision making a fascinating topic.

*Publisher’s Note: Paul Terry has been a long-time contributor to the Practitioner as well as a trusted adviser to me and this publication since its first issue in 1992. HERO couldn’t be in better hands going forward, and we wish Paul the best as he leads this vital health organization.*

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## References

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- 2 Terry, P.E., The Art of Innovation and An Interview With James Prochaska. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, May/June 2012, DOI: 10.4278/ajhp.26.5. tahp. P. 1-12.