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## INTRODUCTION THE GREAT CRADLE DEBATE

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Laura and Michael Rose have everything they could possibly want, or do they? She's 32, a successful physical therapist, who also paints. He's 35, an environmental engineer and avid hiker. After eight years of marriage, Laura and Michael enjoy each other more than ever. They seem to have the perfect balance of independence and relatedness. Apart, she does yoga; he plays guitar. Together, they meditate, hike, and hang out with friends. They ski in Vermont and snorkel in the Bahamas. What more could they possibly want?

Possibly, they want a baby. But they don't know. And the question is driving them crazy.

"Why can't we decide?" asks Michael. "Are we neurotic? Selfish? Immature? Why don't we just chuck Laura's pills and let nature take its course? Maybe things were better in the old days when contraceptives weren't around. Sometimes I almost wish an 'accident' would take us off the hook."

"To make matters worse," says Laura, "we're not even consistent in our conflict. It isn't as if one of us wants a baby and the other doesn't. One minute I'll say to Michael, 'I'm just chicken. Let's throw away the pills,' and he'll say, 'But what about your work? Will you still be able to paint?' A few minutes later, Michael will say, 'I'm nuts about kids. I want to be a father.' Then I ask, 'But what about our relationship?'"

Michael wonders, “Will life still be exciting if the closest we get to Vermont is our pancake syrup? We think of our best friends, who love being parents and who still practice law together. Then we think of my brother and his wife, who have a sick infant and a spoiled toddler. My sister-in-law wishes she’d never quit her executive job. One childfree friend sends us quotes about how children wreck your life. We’ve read books and articles about this decision, but we still don’t know what to do.”

Does this story strike a familiar chord? Are you and your partner, like Laura and Michael, caught up in an endless cycle of conflicting emotions and doubts? Do you spend too much time weighing pros and cons without moving forward? If so, take heart. Now you can find an answer. The baby decision need not drive you crazy. The question that tugs at you like a lead weight is actually a golden opportunity for you and your partner to grow as individuals and as a couple; to deepen your relationship; to *choose* the kind of life that will bring you both the most happiness. In fact, if you dig deeply enough, you’ll find buried treasure at your feet. But you won’t find this this bonanza without a treasure map.

*The Baby Decision* is such a map. It will not only help you make a decision that’s right for you but also show you how to use that decision as a springboard to greater fulfillment. It will guide you, step by step, to a decision you can live with happily.

“Why is this decision so difficult?” my clients and workshop attendees moan. Are we the wishy-washy-est people on the planet? “Wouldn’t most normal, reasonable people have decided by now?”

I answer their question with a question of my own:

Do you want this job, which I am about to offer you?

Listen carefully:

If you accept it, you will have to do it for twenty years. Before you commit, you are not allowed to try it out or even meet your boss/coworker. Consequently, you may have no idea if you will like the job or the person. Nor will you know until you start it if you will love or hate it. During the three months of your apprenticeship, you will endure sleepless nights, twenty-four hour shifts, seven days a week. Sound good so far?

But wait. There's more. For this grueling job, you will not receive a salary. In fact, you have to pay tens of thousands of dollars to do it. Oh, and also there's no clause for quitting, at least not for the first eighteen years.

Are you grabbing the contract, pen in hand and pulling your partner over to the desk to sign up right away?

When, Dear Reader, you read this, are you still wondering why you and your partner can't make a decision? Do you have incurable indecisiveness? Or are you just being thoughtful and careful? This book will guide you to an answer that works for you.

You may be a little skeptical if you've read other books, posts, and articles on the topic. Perhaps they offered a little new information, but didn't get you unstuck. You and your partner may be long on talk because you're short on guidance. The available literature on the subject has focused primarily on weighing the pros and cons of parenting or measuring an individual's potential skills as a parent. Although these issues are useful and necessary, they add up to only two pieces of a larger puzzle. And because they overemphasize logic to the detriment of emotion, they're often less than helpful. This book, however, is much more comprehensive because it will fill in these five, important missing pieces:

1. **How to discover secret resources for decision-making feelings about children and life goals.** Exercises designed especially for this book use fantasy, visual imagery, and other techniques to stimulate new insights.

2. **How to make allies of emotion and logic.** Often mistaken for enemies, emotion and logic form an amiable partnership in the best of all possible decisions. *The Baby Decision* offers steps to a rational choice based on emotional awareness.
3. **How to use the new emotional awareness as a guidepost to growth.** This book offers many examples of how people have grown from their decisions. It shows you how to reap similar benefits from your decision.
4. **How to focus on potential happiness.** I help you ask yourself, “Which choice offers me (and us) the most satisfaction?” I examine the ways that each lifestyle both helps and hinders personal and marital fulfillment.
5. **How to overcome a dangerous blind spot.** The “children are heaven” illusion has been replaced, in the swing of a pendulum, by a “children are hell” illusion. But who can base a wise decision on a foolish distortion? *The Baby Decision* splashes a bucket of cold reality over the new soap-opera fantasy. It also challenges other illusions that prevent good decision-making.

Once you’ve learned how to tap into the *right* information, those seemingly fruitless discussions will yield a surprising number of insights. These insights will get you unstuck and moving toward a good decision.

Header 3

### SAFETY OR GROWTH—IT'S YOUR CHOICE

The word “decide” comes from a Latin root meaning “to cut away from.” Thus, decision-making, by its very nature, involves loss; we have to give up one or more options while at the same time grasping another. When we decide to have a child, we cut ourselves off from the freedom and other satisfactions of childfree living. Similarly, the decision to remain childfree means that we must give up the intimacy and joys of parenting. By *not* deciding, we hold onto the illusion that we can have it both ways—that we don’t have to give up anything. Nor do we have to face the risk of discovering that we’ve made the wrong decision.

But we pay a price when we try to hang onto this illusion—emotional turmoil and feelings of frustration and ambivalence. And, in many instances, that price is too high. Our fears notwithstanding, when we face the issues of loss and risk squarely, we force ourselves to come to terms with our ambivalence and, in the process, we grow.

In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, the late humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow distinguished between two kinds of motivation—growth motivation and deficiency motivation. When a person is motivated by deficiency or safety needs, he or she acts out of a desire to decrease anxiety. Any kind of change seems too risky, and therefore frightening, to undertake. On the other hand, when a person is motivated by growth needs, his or her actions reflect a desire for greater fulfillment. The risks seem less important than the possibility of improving one’s life.

This distinction between growth and safety needs applies equally well to the decision-making process in general and to the baby decision in particular. There are, in fact, six possible baby decisions, three of which are growth decisions and three of which are safety decisions.

The three growth decisions are:

1. **The decision to become a parent.** You are taking the leap to make the best possible decision despite the lack of guarantees that you will be happy with the outcome. You have looked carefully, and despite doubt and fear, despite the attractions of remaining childfree, you are moving forward.
2. **The decision to remain childfree.** Like the decision to become a parent, you have found the courage to choose the life you think will be best, without guarantees. You are willing to fight against pronatalist pressure to live by your values.
3. **The decision to postpone the decision but with definite goals for the postponement period and a target date for reevaluation.** You are being clear-eyed and strategic. You will not let yourself drift endlessly in indecision. You set goals and plan a time to take stock. Examples might be, between now and January 1<sup>st</sup>, we will see a financial planner, interview childfree and parenting friends about their lives and choices, and see doctors for basic fertility information. Once a month, we'll spend an hour on Sunday night to take stock of our findings and feelings

Why are these “growth decisions”? Because when you make them you:

- Take responsibility for yourself.
- Take a risk.
- Make a commitment.
- Learn something about yourself (and your partner).
- Have an opportunity to use all of the above, responsibility, risk-taking, commitment, and learning to develop and grow.

In contrast, the three safety decisions are:

1. **The non-decision to have a baby (also known as the “non-accidental accident”).**

After perhaps five years of marriage with no previous “accidents,” a couple struggling with the baby decision suddenly has an “accident.” It may be unconscious (such as forgetting to take the pill), or conscious (“Let’s not bother with a condom tonight”); it may be a joint accident or the result of one partner’s actions. However, it happens, the result of such a non-decision (besides the baby) is that the couple is taken off the hook. They declare that nature or fate made the decision. They avoid having to answer to anybody—including themselves—for their “decision.”

2. **The non-decision to remain childfree.** In this situation, a couple tells themselves and others that they don’t know whether they want children. Maybe later on, they say. So they simply drift without ever making a conscious commitment to the childfree lifestyle. And, in the process, they don’t have to admit their desire to remain childfree or deal with disapproval from others or their own fear of regrets. They also miss the chance to be thoughtful and strategic in creating the childfree life that takes their specific needs and goals into account.

3. **The non-decision to agonize.** This is the antithesis of the growth decision to postpone. In the latter case, a couple postpones the decision for specified reasons and a finite period of time in order to meet specific goals. However, in this type of non-decision, a couple set no goals; rather, they circle the issue frantically, full of doubt and confusion. Although they claim they would love nothing better than resolution, they actually get a payoff—in the form of unhealthy satisfaction generated by their painful soul-searching.

*Although all three of the safety decisions appear to be emotionally cheaper in the short run, they are costlier in the long run.* Non-decision-makers are bound to feel like victims rather than masters of their own fate. While they may avoid the momentary agony of making difficult choices, they are actually condemning themselves to chronic pain. By clinging to a safety decision, they miss an opportunity to take stock and use what they learn about themselves. We could even label safety decisions as “danger decisions” because they are detrimental to your development. If you make a non-decision, you won’t have to deal with your pain directly, but you’ll never really get rid of it, either.

In direct contrast, the three growth decisions allow you to get to know yourself and all your strengths and weaknesses. You may not like everything you find, but if you know what’s there, at least you can make the best of it. With the help of this book you’ll be able to make one of these three growth decisions—if you’re willing to take the risks involved.

Hard as this decision may seem, it is undoubtedly one of the most important you’ll make in your life. And it should not be made lightly, by default, or by blind adherence to custom. In fact, you’re extremely lucky to be able to make a real decision about childbearing although in the midst of grappling with the issue you may feel less than fortunate. When your grandparents and great-grandparents had children, they didn’t have to struggle with your dilemma. Men and women married and had children without ever making a conscious decision. It was, after all, the natural order of life, what their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had done. And many discovered, too late, that parenting was not as easy, natural, or rewarding as they had expected.



A talk show host once asked me whether it was a sign of sickness in our society that couples like Laura and Michael were questioning whether or not to have children.

“Absolutely not,” I replied. “It’s very healthy for couples to decide carefully, rather than simply having children because ‘that’s what people do.’”

Certainly, not everyone is suited, by temperament, circumstance, or desire, to become a parent. And when couples have children without considering the issue carefully, they may find themselves trapped in a situation they did not anticipate and may not want. The result is a great deal of unhappiness for the parents, the child, and for society. Two happy, productive childfree people can contribute more to society than two unwilling parents and their unhappy child

John Stuart Mill said, “He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice.” Choice is the foundation of happiness and mental health. When we make a *conscious* decision about parenthood we can, if we so choose, embrace parenting wholeheartedly and joyfully, fully aware of all its responsibilities and ramifications. Similarly, if we *choose* to remain childfree, we can enjoy rich, productive lives without guilt or self-doubt. Only if we consider the childfree lifestyle a valid option can we be certain that a parenthood decision is a valid decision.

*The decision-making process is both healthy and necessary, and there is no universal right decision.* Whether you ultimately choose to become a parent or remain childfree depends entirely on the unique qualities of your personality and your relationship.

Heading 3

### **THE DECISION MAKER’S BILL OF RIGHTS**

You are entitled to:

- Make a decision that is right for you and your partner.
- Take into consideration your needs, values, goals, and personality before making a decision.
- Base your decision on your potential happiness rather than a sense of obligation.
- Take time, if you need it, before making the decision.
- Be an active partner in the choice rather than acquiescing to your partner's demands.
- Make the decision that is right for you even if others disapprove.
- Put a stop to others' attempts to shame or intimidate you into making either choice.
- Be your own judge of your reasons for your choice: to be childfree without being accused of selfishness, immaturity, or neurosis; to be a parent without being accused of selfishness, immaturity, or neurosis.
- Be a parent regardless of your marital status, gender, or sexual orientation.
- Change your mind in the future, if you originally planned to have a child but now realize you don't want one; you once made a commitment to childfree living but now want to have a child.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Even if you think you've already made your decision, I urge you to read the first few chapters. If you don't, you may never know whether your first decision really was your best decision. The process won't sway you if your chosen decision is right for you. Your added confidence as a result of your reading will allow you to get the most of the book and your life choice.

Similarly, if you and your partner are in conflict over the decision, you may be tempted to go straight to the Chapter 6, "Tug-of-War." Please don't. Only if you both carefully examine your own needs and wishes will you be sure that you are talking about and negotiating the right issues.

The exercises in Chapter 2, "Secret Doors" will extricate you from tangled, distracting thoughts so you can make a clear decision. The following guidelines will increase the effectiveness of the exercises.

1. **Put yourself into the exercises.** Bear in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. They do not test your parenting skills or mental health. You won't score them. They are included solely to help you in the same way that ancient Greeks consulted the Delphic oracle. In *The Courage to Create*, existential psychologist Rollo May describes the oracle's work in this way:

The sayings of the shrine, like dreams, were not to be received passively; the recipients had to live themselves into the message. . . The counsels of Delphi were not advice in the strictest sense, but rather were stimulants to look inward, to consult their own intuition and wisdom.

So try to *live yourself* into these exercises. If you do, you'll return from your journey with a decision you can live with.

2. **Try to be as honest with yourself as possible.** Your answers are not fortune-tellers. You can't stand to hear a baby cry? You can still be a parent if you want to; you can get used to tears and learn to cope with your tension. Do you have a weakness for freckle-faced three-year-olds? You can still be childfree if you want to. You can "borrow" a freckled sprite on Saturday afternoons. What you cannot do, however, is exercise freedom of choice *unless* you consider both options thoroughly. Conflicting feelings don't mean you're hopelessly confused. They mean you're human.
3. **Consider yourself.** Do the exercises *alone* first. If you have a partner, you can compare notes later. You each need to take your own thorough reading before you compare notes.
4. **Read each exercise all the way through before starting it.** Then, close your eyes to help yourself turn inward. Perhaps you are feeling some stirrings of curiosity and readiness to focus. Remember, hard as the decision-making process may seem at times, the rewards you'll reap are enormous. And you may even discover that the journey is more fun than you'd ever imagined. You're going to learn a lot about yourself, your partner, and your relationship by the time that you arrive at your decision.

A word about the title and subtitle. I realize that calling the book *The Baby Decision*, could make it appear that I advocate choosing a child over being childfree. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Since the first edition came out in 1981, readers, mental health professionals and book critics write that they have found the book unbiased. I take pride in being a pioneer in the early eighties of advocating for childfree people at a time when professionals, the media and the public disapproved. I chose the title because readers tell me that even if they are

leaning toward being childfree, the word *baby*, accompanied by a mental image of an infant, grabs their attention. This mental picture is a useful reminder of the unfinished business involved in definitively ruling out parenthood so they can get on with their lives.

Now, for the subtitle: My younger daughter, who is currently childfree, commented on the book's subtitle, *How to Make the Most Important Choice of Your Life*. She took issue with the phrase "Most Important" because for those who don't want to have a child, deciding not to have a child is not what is most important; it is the decision to go with something else in their life that is most important. She feels that our baby-centric culture puts more emphasis on the decision to have children than all the myriad reasons that one may not, including personal preference, lifestyle, finances, creative projects and other life goals, all of which may be an individual's "most important choice."

So one way of looking at deciding to be childfree is to consider that ruling out parenthood is an important choice that frees your energy, time, and money for what matters most to you.

Choosing to become a parent is not easy in these tough times. I want to acknowledge issues that may be foremost in your mind as you read the book, issues which this book cannot thoroughly address.

For instance, you may want to have a child, but due to job insecurity, college loans or other debt, you worry you won't be able to make ends meet. This brings up the unfairness that wealthy people, no matter their actual capacity to be good parents, can afford fertility treatments, alternatives such as adoption, as well as day care and other costs of raising a child.

In regard to paying for fertility treatment, your state may mandate coverage for infertility treatment. Also the websites [creatingafamily.org](http://creatingafamily.org) and [RESOLVE.org](http://RESOLVE.org) have information about grants or sliding scales for adoption or medical treatment. Your clinic may have grants or scholarships.

You may be questioning whether to bring a child into a world of economic insecurity, racism, sexism, homophobia, war, terrorism, global warming, and other threats to our planet. It may help to talk to friends who have decided to have a child anyway, and how they arrived at their decision in light of the above concerns. You will find readings and resources addressing these issues in the appendices of this book. For instance, Conceivable Future is an exciting organization bringing attention to the environment's effect on reproduction and reproductive decisions.

I want readers to know that I am keeping these issues in mind, and not addressing only upper middle-class, married, straight white people, but any reader who wants to make a decision.

Related to this, I have tried to use inclusive language such as “partner,” “couple” to accommodate gay readers and unmarried straight couples. I have also tried to address single people, either directly or by adding (“if you have a partner” or by suggesting a good friend as a substitute sounding board for some couple exercises. However, there are unique dynamics between men and women in traditional families who are raising children. So in cases where my vignette is based on a husband and wife, or I am addressing non-sexist shared parenting issues, I do use the words “husband and “wife.” I also want to acknowledge that gay couples have described to me shared parenting dynamics based on one partner being primarily the parent, the other the primary breadwinner. I hope you will agree that I have managed reasonably well to be inclusive.

There are two language problems with the word “childfree.” Ideally there would be no need to mention that someone doesn't have a child. Ideally there would be a word that didn't have “child” in it. Also, some people who decide to remain childfree after infertility prefer the

word “childless,” as more reflective of their sense of loss. Also some people who are childfree by choice enjoy children and have a life quite full of them. They feel the word “childfree” suggests that they are anti-child. Clearly language hasn’t caught up to the culture.

You may wonder what chapters on infertility are doing in a book for people who haven’t even started trying. Don’t worry. These chapters won’t jinx you, and you can just skip over them. Although listening to your friends or chatting online may have convinced you otherwise, most people don’t have fertility problems (the statistics are one out of six couples) even though it may take several months or even a year to get pregnant. So you can breeze right past those pages and use the rest of the book for decision-making and planning.

I have included information about fertility and adoption because I know that some of my readers are currently in treatment and are using my decision-making techniques to decide among treatment alternatives. Others are at the tail end of fertility treatment and use this book to help them decide to stop treatment and move on to adoption, pregnancy alternatives such a donor egg or surrogacy, or childfree living. Still other readers have no history or specific expectations of fertility problems, but because of their ages, they don’t want to even consider trying for a baby without knowing something about the next steps if they have trouble. They may decide to try, but rule out strong drugs or invasive treatments. After knowing what’s involved, they may want to go straight to adoption or childfree living and avoid the fertility roller-coaster altogether.

Are you undergoing fertility treatment or have you in the past? You can use this book, including Chapter 2, “Secret Doors” to clarify what appeals to you about parenthood, and in light of this, to consider which alternatives might meet your needs. For instance, if being a parent is more important to you than genetics or pregnancy, adoption could be a solution that

puts an end to the stress of fertility treatment. If no alternative methods such as donor insemination or donor egg appeal to you, then the childfree choice might be an answer, even if right now, you cannot even imagine that could be a tolerable, much less satisfactory choice.

While it is hard to consider the childfree choice after working so hard to have a child, it could wind up making sense later on. The bibliography includes readings that specifically address the needs of those who choose childfree after infertility, including my article, “Childfree Decision-Making” available at [www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org). I also talk about this in the childfree section of this book.

If you are struggling with infertility, I also want to acknowledge that you may be frustrated as you read *The Baby Decision* to realize that some people who might be able to conceive or carry a pregnancy easily may choose to be childfree while your choices are more limited. Nevertheless, I have tried to structure the book in a way that may offer you healing, connection, and guidance. I hope this helps you move forward.



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## CHAPTER 1 A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Even with a map in hand, exploring new territory can be frightening, especially since no map can illustrate every rock and pebble in your path. Therefore, it's helpful to scout out the territory first to get a bird's-eye view of what's to come. That's what this chapter is all about.

The questions in this chapter are those most frequently asked by couples when they first consider the baby question. And I've discovered that unless these issues are covered immediately, readers are too tense or worried to venture out. It is hard to make a decision if you don't know what to expect or how to proceed. This chapter, therefore, provides some basic and necessary guidelines: who should make the decision; how to get rid of a sense of panic; why a wrong decision won't ruin your life. After all, forewarned is forearmed. So use this chapter to gain some necessary perspective before delving into the decision-making process itself.

### IS THIS A WOMAN'S DECISION?

"I don't want Walter to come to your workshop," Martha, a feminist client says to me.

"I don't think I could discuss my feelings honestly."

Double Indent Single Space

"Sooner or later every *woman* faces the question of whether or not to have a baby"

(emphasis mine)

Double Indent single space end

—*Publisher's Weekly*

This is not a book for *women*. It is a book for people, male and female, single or coupled, gay or straight who are contemplating parenthood. A common problem for traditional male-female couples occurs when a woman assumes that she should have the biggest say in the baby decision.

Without realizing it, they may be holding onto the traditional assumption that mothering is more important than fathering—that women are necessarily more involved in parenting. And yet these women may be resentful when their partners don't assume their fair share of the child-care burdens. Shared investment in the decision paves the way for shared investment in parenting. On bad days, you don't want to hear, "This wasn't my idea." Lesbian and gay couples may run into similar conflicts if one partner is planning to be the primary partner but wants their mate to commit to sharing childcare and housework.

Most single parents by choice don't decide in a vacuum either. They use trusted family or friends as sounding boards. These members of your "village" are not only useful in helping you talk through your decision, but also potential providers of physical and psychological support to you and your child. Offers to help may naturally follow if you include these people in your decision-making process. Of course, I'm not suggesting that you pretend to ask for decision-making help in hope of offers of support! (In this case, ask for help directly, and closer to the time of adoption or birth. I am just trying to make the point that in general, it's best to include partners or other trusted helpers in your decision-making.

Even if a woman chooses to remain childfree and her partner goes along with her wish, a decision made independently still buys into the sexist notion that children “belong” to the female world in the same way that work “belongs” to the male world. In the past, when motherhood was a woman’s primary source of identity and prestige, this assumption had some validity. Because most women stayed at home to care for their children while men worked, they *were* more involved in parenting. But now that women are also meeting career needs, they are becoming more aware of the difficulties of combining motherhood with a career and demanding their partner’s involvement.

The importance of both members of the couple having a voice in the decision applies to gay couples, too. If one gay spouse is especially adamant about remaining childfree, the other partner, despite a willingness to grant the partner’s wish, still needs to take stock of their personal decision and share that in a couple conversation. The person who would have preferred to have a child needs the other person’s compassion and appreciation (See Chapter 6, “Tug-of-War”).

Heading 3

### **How to Get Your Hand Off the Panic Button**

Because this issue often generates a lot of anxiety and tension, many couples make their decision about having a child prematurely simply because a decision—any decision—relieves their sense of panic. But hasty decisions are not always good decisions. The calmer you are, the better the chance that you will make the right choice. So give yourself time to read, relax, and daydream. The following guidelines may help.

1. **Ask yourself why you're in such a hurry to decide.** Do any of these statements strike a chord?
  - You can't stand uncertainty about your future. Or you can't stand your own inner conflict. In either case, you feel desperate to decide quickly to end your discomfort.
  - Based on your age, you're afraid that if you don't start trying immediately you may never get pregnant.
  - Because panic is a catchable "disease," you have become infected with your friends' sense of urgency.
  - You're leaning toward the childfree choice, and you're afraid that if you don't decide now, you'll change your mind and be sorry later.
  - You're leaning toward parenthood, and you're afraid you'll have trouble getting pregnant. Even though you are not yet sure that a baby is the best choice, you won't relax until you get a positive slip from a lab.
  - You know what you want. Your partner seems open to your choice but is wavering. You want to finalize the decision before your partner considers reversing it.
  
2. **Jump off the "must-decide-today" treadmill.** All these pressures stem from your feelings, not from the facts. It's not a biological time bomb but an emotional time bomb that is threatening to explode within you. Keep reminding yourself that you *don't have to decide now*. Even if you're in your late thirties, you can probably still have a baby.
  
3. **Give yourself permission to be anxious.** "Anxiety tells you that something important

is about to happen,” says Dr. Glenn Larson, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Nashville, TN. Of course you are anxious. You are making one of the most important decisions of your life. Anxiety indicates that you’re taking the process seriously. In fact, moderate anxiety can be useful because it encourages you to work on the decision. It’s only extreme anxiety that gets in the way, and you can reduce your anxiety level.

4. **Turn your anxiety into excitement.** Excitement is the flip side of anxiety. Instead of trying to escape it, try to get closer. Is there a part of you that is stirred by the baby question? A part of you that is eager to learn more about yourself and to put these bits of knowledge to work for you? A part that’s curious to know what the final decision will be? Try to imagine how good you will feel when you have made the decision. Visualize the joy of having a child or living creatively without children.
5. **Give yourself permission to be uncertain.** In the name of no-nonsense decisiveness, a lot of nonsense is committed. You will have to live with the consequences of your decision for the rest of your life, so it’s reasonable to take as much time as you need for decision-making. It’s fine to make a quick decision about buying a car or taking a job. You can always decide just as quickly to sell or quit, but a baby decision can’t be reversed. The amount of attention given a decision should be in proportion to the seriousness of its consequences.
6. **Try to keep your sense of humor.** A light touch is always helpful when you’re facing a heavy question.
  - Ed and Mary, who collect antique glass, joke about whether they’ll be buying old lady’s bottles or new baby’s bottles next year.
  - Cathy and Steve laugh at the idea of themselves rocking by the fire in their 60s and still debating whether they want a child.

Spending time with friends who are also tossing around the decision may help you lighten up.

7. **Tell yourself that you will make a good decision.** Shut off that raspy voice that says you are going to blow it and live with regret for the rest of your life. If you think through your decision carefully, you will be relatively satisfied with your choice. Rest assured that your intelligence, imagination, and courage will lead you to a good decision. And knowing that you will have some regrets – no matter what – may quiet the voice.
8. **Don't compare yourself to other couples who decided quickly.** They may have decided prematurely, or they may have made a poor decision. And even if they claim to have decided in a matter of days or even on one special night, if it's a good decision, they probably worked on it for weeks, months, or years. Perhaps they didn't have constant discussions, but in the backs of their minds, they had probably been considering the question for a long time.

### **Deciding Under Emergency CIRCUMSTANCES**

In some cases, of course, a sense of panic is generated by more than emotional pressure. There are two circumstances in which a decision *is* a genuine emergency:

1. You have an unplanned pregnancy, and you have to decide whether to continue it.
2. You have an illness or a condition that is worsening, and your doctor tells you that with each month you wait: (a) your chance of conceiving lessens; (b) the probability increases of having surgery that would compromise your fertility; (c) the likelihood of serious complications arising from a pregnancy increases; or (d)

your health may be threatened by the delay in treatment.

If either of these situations applies to you, try to keep your wits about you. You'll make a wiser decision if you're calm. Even though you have to decide quickly, *you don't have to decide in the next five minutes*. Don't give in to the temptation to pick a decision, any decision, just to end the crisis. Taking a day or two could mean the difference between a desperate guess and wise choice.

You may not have several months, but you certainly do have a few days or maybe even a week or two to think things over. You (and your partner) may want to take time off from work to allow yourself time and energy for decision-making. As a preliminary step, try fighting off feelings of panic by meditating, deep breathing, running, swimming, or doing whatever exercise or activity helps you relax. Then, take the time to do the exercises in this book. They will help you uncover your deepest feelings about children. They'll also help you consider the compatibility of children with your other goals and values.

In the case of a medical problem:

- **Ask your physician to give you a full explanation of your condition, how it impinges on your childbearing potential, and the risks involved in delaying motherhood.**
- **Read lay literature on your condition. Take into consideration the source of the information.** Is it from a vetted website such as The Mayo Clinic or The American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM)? Be wary of sources funded by pharmaceutical or medical device companies or blogs, which may include misinformation.
- **Get a second opinion.** Does the consultant also consider the decision an emergency? Are there other possibilities, contingencies, or treatments your doctor

didn't mention that may make sense to try before undergoing the intervention recommended by your doctor?

Finally, whether your problem is an unplanned pregnancy or a medical condition, consider counseling to help you make your decision. If the first person you consult is not understanding and unbiased, seek out another counselor. (See Chapter 12, "Help!" and the Resources section in the Appendix for suggestions on finding help.)

### **HOW LONG IS TOO LONG?**

For some couples, however, haste isn't the problem. They've given themselves plenty of time to make a decision, but the right choice continues to elude them. If this problem sounds familiar, you may be wondering if it's possible to spend too much time on your decision. Ask yourself another question: How do I feel? Do you feel that you are using the time constructively, growing, and moving slowly but surely toward resolution? Can you and your partner tell each other, "Even if we don't know or don't agree, at least we're sharing something important with each other?" If your feelings are generally positive, don't worry. Quality of thinking, not speed, is what counts most in decision-making.

However, if you feel that you're caught on a treadmill, getting angrier and more frustrated, caught in a non-decision to agonize, then you're probably not using the time wisely or well. The same applies if you never talk about the decision and even find excuses not to talk at arranged times.

Heading 3



## WILL THE WRONG DECISION RUIN YOUR LIFE?

This question is often uppermost in many potential parents' minds. My answer: probably not, for two reasons:

1. **How you make your decision and how you apply it to your life may be as important to your future happiness as the decision itself.** Let's look at two couples:

- Don and Cindy got married because they liked telling each other their troubles. Cindy cries on Don's shoulder about the discrimination she runs up against as the only woman executive at her bank. Don dumps all his wrath at the school board for banning his booklist on outsider fiction in his high school classroom at Cindy's feet.

Everyone needs support. But if you are to be happy, you have to move beyond support in order to find solutions. Don and Cindy, it seems, would rather wallow in the mud than make mud pies. They discuss the baby decision seven nights a week. It invades every aspect of their lives. It has crawled into bed during lovemaking. It has toddled around the restaurant table when they tried to celebrate Cindy's birthday. Now, instead of wailing about the unfairness of their co-workers, they wail about the unfairness of decision-making when the outcome is unknown. They view parenthood as an albatross pulling them down; childfree living as a free-floating emptiness. If they decide to remain childfree, they will spend an endless amount of time reassuring themselves that they have made the right decision. Then, when Cindy is past childbearing age, they will engage in long breast-beating sessions, bemoaning their supposed selfishness, envying their friends with children, and cursing the childfree proponents who "mised" them. If, on the other hand, they decide to have a child, they will spend nine months worrying about birth defects and their parenting abilities. Will they be relieved when they have a healthy baby and find they can cope with it? No! They will simply transfer their worries to parenting.

No matter what Don and Cindy do, they will not enjoy themselves. The power tools of decision-making will slip right through their fingers. They are so threatened by the question "What do you want?" that they won't let themselves answer it. Each tries to second-guess the other, coming up with the decision s/he thinks the partner wants. For Don and Cindy, this opportunity to grow merely becomes an opportunity to be unhappy in a new way.

- Ruth and Phil are just as uncertain about children as Don and Cindy are, but the question excites them. They are having trouble deciding because they anticipate deep pleasure from either choice. They're enjoying the opportunity to learn about themselves and each other in new ways. The closeness they feel as they discuss this intimate issue is enhancing an already good relationship. If Ruth and Phil remain childfree, they will work with the preschoolers instead of the adults in the environmental center where they volunteer. Ruth will have plenty of time to study yoga and ballet. Phil will be able to climb mountains and grow vegetables to his heart's content. If they become parents, they will be thrilled with the thousands of ways children unfold. For a while, they'll have to gear down on work and outside interests, but they will do so willingly, aware that in a few years, their child will go to school and hang out with friends, allowing them to gear up again.

These stories are, of course, exaggerated to emphasize the differences between these couples and their approach to life. As you work on this decision, you will find that you have some of Don and Cindy's destructive fear and some of Ruth and Phil's constructive openness. But you can use Ruth and Phil for inspiration, realizing that a generally positive approach to life could contribute to your happiness regardless of the decision you make.

2. **The very fact that a decision is necessary indicates that both choices have some appeal for you.** Therefore, regardless of the decision you make, a part of you will enjoy the outcome. And you can use the objections to help you steer clear of possible pitfalls.

Actually, no matter which decision you make, you'll probably have some regrets. But that isn't so terrible. Coming to accept the imperfection of life and making the best of it is a wonderful way to grow. It will help you cope with other issues that you're ambivalent about, too.

By now, you may be wondering why this decision requires so much care if a wrong choice won't ruin your life. Even though you can probably live a good life with or without children, it's definitely to your advantage to make an informed, thoughtful decision. Here's why:

- **It offers the opportunity to learn about yourself and your partner.** In order to answer the baby question successfully, you must also answer two other questions: "Who am I?" and if you have a partner, "Who are we?" And these answers can help you solve other problems.
- **It forces you to take responsibility for yourself.** By making a conscious decision, you take control of your life. Even though you risk failure or regret, you earn self-respect. You cannot help but take pride in assuming responsibility for yourself rather than drifting passively, waiting for an accident or your partner's preferences to take you off the hook.
- **It increases the probability that you will enjoy and make the most of your choice.** Working on a conscious choice forces you to consider carefully the possibilities offered by each lifestyle. This gives you a head start in taking advantage of your ultimate choice.
- **It provides an opportunity to build skills for future decision-making of all kinds.** Technological advances and changing societal mores mean that in the future you will

have other big decisions. Making a good baby decision is good practice for future decisions.

### **ANXIETY-PROOF YOURSELF**

If you are still anxious about the baby question, try this fantasy exercise before you delve any further into the decision-making process. Ask yourself: what is the worst thing that could happen in this situation? Pinpointing potential problems or disasters and recognizing your ability to cope with them is an effective way to reduce anxiety. And you can put the mental energy previously wasted worrying to more productive use.

1. **Imagine that you and your partner decide to remain childfree.** What's the worst thing that could result from this decision? How would you feel about it? What would you do about it?

Susan and Mark tried this exercise. For both, the ultimate horror was the idea of facing a lonely old age full of sadness that they wouldn't live on through their grandchildren. They imagined they might be disappointed about missing parenthood, but realized they could find comfort in their artistic, athletic, and professional activities and in loving relationships with their nieces and nephews.

2. **Imagine you decide to have a child.** What's the worst thing that could happen? Try to picture it, as well as your reaction to it. What would you do about it?

In this situation, Susan imagined that her career was ruined, filling her with anger and resentment at the baby and at Mark. Mark imagined that he and Susan wouldn't have any time together anymore and that their relationship would go downhill.

They agreed that Susan's fantasy wouldn't happen because Mark would take equal responsibility for the baby if they had one. To deal with Mark's fears, they talked about ways in which their friends had managed to maintain good relationships while their children were young. These fantasies helped Mark and Susan feel a lot freer to explore both possibilities. Now, you try them.