

**Literature and Coping Skills**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology (BHU) Varanasi**  
**Lecture No. 20**  
**Robert Frost, “The Road not Taken”**

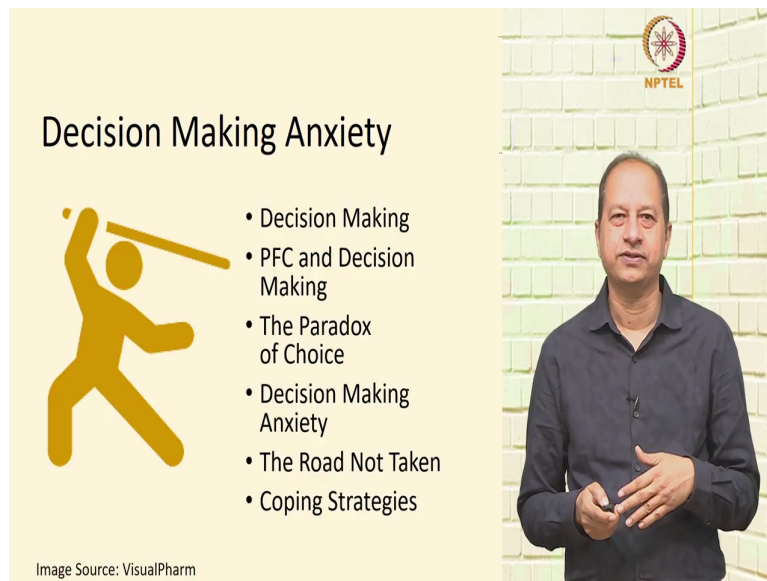
Hello, everybody. I am Ajit K Mishra, your course instructor for Literature and Coping Skills. I am back with another lecture and this time I want to talk about decision making anxiety. If you remember in my last lecture, I talked about death anxiety and I also showed how with the help of a literary composition, we can develop certain skills and strategies and we can take care of our death anxiety.

Similarly, this time, I am also going to talk about decision making anxiety and I have chosen a literary composition, a poetic text with the help of which I am going to show you how we can develop certain coping skills or strategies in order to take care of our decision making anxiety. So, we all know decision making is not an easy process.

The moment we are told that we are to make a decision, we are visited by a great amount of anxiety; there are certain decisions that do not have serious consequences. But the moment you realise, you are aware that your decision is going to have serious consequences, you begin to experience anxiety that is perfectly fine. Because that particular experience of anxiety will let you know that you are serious about that particular thing. You are serious about your decision.

So, today, I am going to talk about decision making anxiety and its various facets, one by one and I will walk you through each one of those elements in today's lecture.

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## Decision Making Anxiety

- Decision Making
- PFC and Decision Making
- The Paradox of Choice
- Decision Making Anxiety
- The Road Not Taken
- Coping Strategies

Image Source: VisualPharm

So, we will start with the idea of decision making and then we will move to the prefrontal cortex and decision making. I will show you the role of PFC in the decision making process and then we will come to a very interesting concept, the Paradox of Choice, which in fact, leads to a great amount of decision making in us. And then we will come to the idea of decision making anxiety and then I will take up the Road Not Taken, a poetic text composed by Robert Frost an American poet.

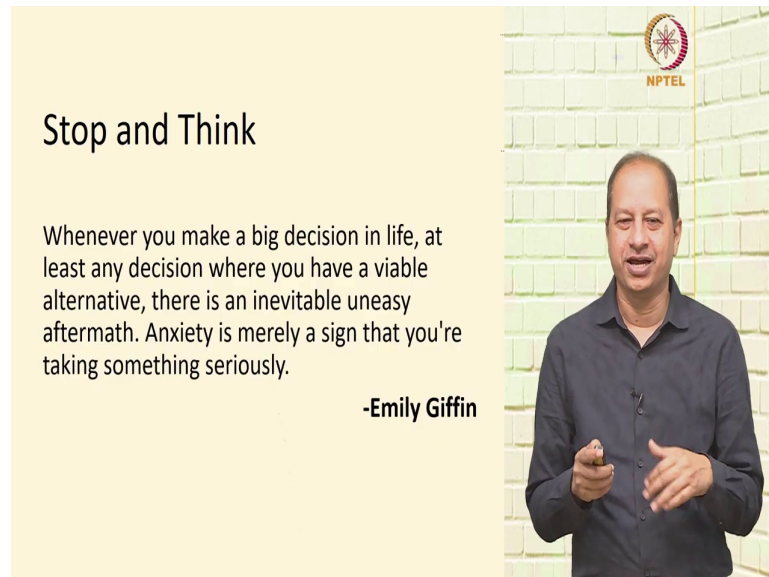
And I will show you how the speaker in that poem, in fact, shows certain wonderful coping skills and strategies that we can also emulate and we can fill our storehouse of coping skills and then I will be focus on specific coping strategies that are used in the Road Not Taken and then we will get to know how this coping strategies can be extremely helpful in similar situations. So, let us take a quick look at each of these elements.

But before I do so, let me tell you that, decision making is such a regular everyday activity that we count evade it. We all make decisions, researchers feel that humans make as much as 3000 decisions every day, starting with the decision of picking a glass of water or to picking your pen writing something, dressing yourself, taking baths and a variety of things.

So, the decision making process is an ongoing process, it never stops. But the problem arises the moment we know that our decision will lead to some kind of consequence, then we suddenly become aware and conscious of it and then we experience anxiety. So, fearing the decision making process is not abnormal. But developing anxiety over the decision making

process for a certain period of time, is of course a clinical condition. So, we will take a look at each of those ideas.

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The slide features a yellow background on the left with the title "Stop and Think" in bold black text. Below the title is a quote: "Whenever you make a big decision in life, at least any decision where you have a viable alternative, there is an inevitable uneasy aftermath. Anxiety is merely a sign that you're taking something seriously." followed by the attribution "-Emily Giffin". On the right side of the slide, there is a video frame showing a man in a dark blue shirt speaking in front of a wall of yellow sticky notes. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the video frame.

Before we talk about decision making, you need to stop and think for a while. Take a look at this quote and as you go through this quote, wherever you make a big decision in life, at least any decision where you have a viable alternative, there is an inevitable uneasy aftermath. Anxiety is merely a sign that you are taking something seriously.

So, there are two very important things that have been suggested in this (cult). The first is, whenever you know that you have a viable alternative and you are asked to make a decision in life especially that will create a huge amount of anxiety in you. But then, at the same time also need to be aware of the fact that your anxiety is a sign that you are taking that particular decision making activity seriously. So, this decision making process has both the sides.

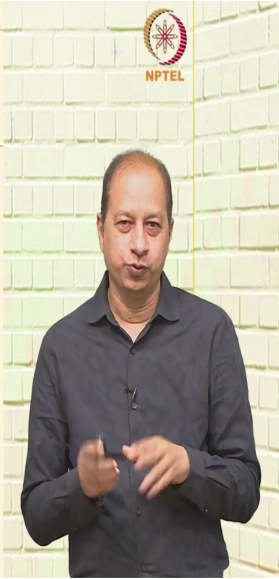
So, it can lead to problems and it can also lead to your rewards. So, therefore, we need to think about it seriously. Emily Gryphon, American author has very rightly suggested that decision making becomes extremely difficult when we have viable options or viable alternatives, right in front of us and that there is bound to lead to anxiety. So, it is not a normal or unnatural to experience anxiety when it comes to decision making.

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## Decision Making

- Decision-making is a cognitive process of making a choice between a number of possible alternatives
- It often involves weighing the risks, rewards, and consequences
- Depends on proper functioning of specific neurons within subregions of the prefrontal cortex (PFC)



So, decision making is a cognitive process, we all know the executive brain functions, the prefrontal cortex becomes extremely active in the decision making process and whenever we make a choice between a number of possible alternatives. So for you, it is important to understand the implications of the idea of choice. So, it is the idea of choice that makes it or renders it difficult- because choice is the result of freedom.

When we know that I am free to make a choice, make a decision, I will certainly like that, we all want to be free; we all want to have a great amount of freedom. But then, if you think about it, from a different perspective or at the hindsight, you will get to know that that particular freedom, which gives us the choice to decide or do things on our own, in fact comes with a baggage of responsibility.

It makes us responsible for our choices, which are the result of the freedom that we enjoy. So, therefore, decision making, which is a result of the freedom of choice, leads to the idea of responsibility and thus to the result of anxiety, because it results in anxiety, so that is a very complex process, what we need to understand it and then we all know that the decision making process involves risks and rewards and consequences.

It can have risk; we all know that very, very well. So, your decision might be a risky proposition, you know that, it will lead to risks, it may also lead to rewards, you never know, because you are not seeing the consequences that lies in the future and we cannot see that and

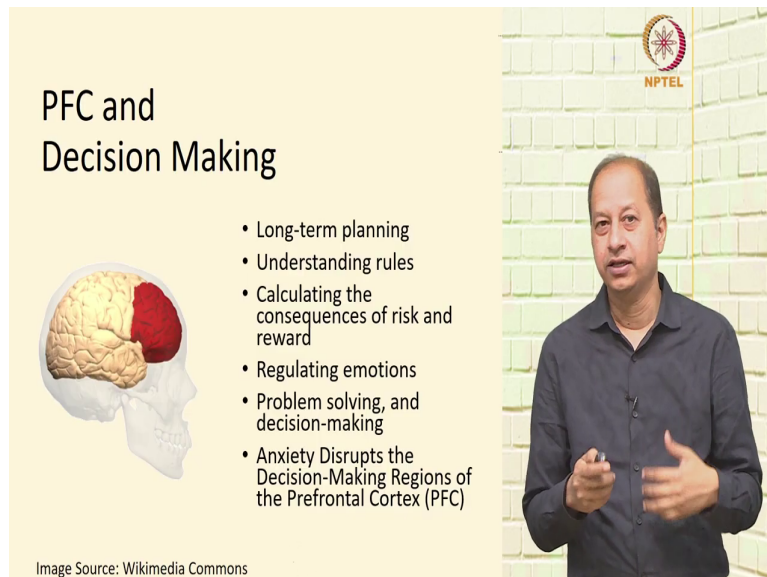


then it can have serious consequences hence, it can lead to severe problems, so that is decision making. It is not an easy task.

And then decision making depends on the proper functioning of the specific neurons or within the sub regions of the prefrontal cortex. So, the prefrontal cortex plays an extremely important role in the decision making process, especially the sub regions of the prefrontal cortex.

So, therefore, the decision making process is cognitive, it is a neurobiological process and it is, of course, a psychological process as well- because it involves risks, rewards and consequences. It is a social process simultaneously. So, therefore, the decision making process is a complex one.

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The slide is titled "PFC and Decision Making". On the left, there is a 3D rendering of a human brain with the prefrontal cortex highlighted in red. To the right of the brain is a bulleted list of functions: Long-term planning, Understanding rules, Calculating the consequences of risk and reward, Regulating emotions, Problem solving, and decision-making, and Anxiety Disrupts the Decision-Making Regions of the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC). At the bottom left of the slide, it says "Image Source: Wikimedia Commons". On the right side of the slide, there is a video frame showing a man in a dark blue shirt speaking, with an NPTEL logo in the top right corner.

**PFC and Decision Making**

- Long-term planning
- Understanding rules
- Calculating the consequences of risk and reward
- Regulating emotions
- Problem solving, and decision-making
- Anxiety Disrupts the Decision-Making Regions of the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

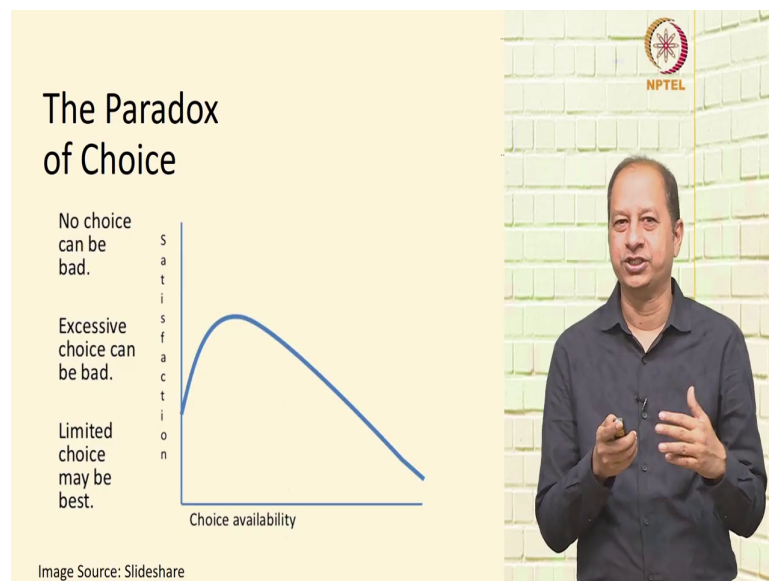
So, we come to the next idea that is PFC and decision making. So, the prefrontal cortex, short PFC is located at the front of the human brain and that is highlighted in red, you can see that. The prefrontal cortex plays an extremely important role in the decision making process. The prefrontal cortex or PFC is responsible for long term planning. It helps us understand rules; it also helps us calculate consequences of risk and reward. It regulates our emotions; therefore it performs a variety of functions.

It is also responsible for problem solving and decision making. Therefore, I mean the executive functions are carried out here. But if we experience or continue to experience anxiety, that particular experience will promptly disrupt the decision making regions of the

prefrontal cortex and the PFC will not be able to help us with these executive functions or stop, think, plan and act.

So, those executive functions, critical thinking functions will not be activated if we are visited by a huge amount of anxiety. So, therefore it is very important that we keep this particular region free from anxiety and how do we do that? The moment we learn how to cope with anxiety, we can take care of these things well.

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That brings us to the idea of the Paradox of Choice. As I told you, choice is a wonderful thing. We all like to have our own choices. We all want to have freedom to choose, the things that we like. Choice gives us a sense of power, a sense of accomplishment, achievement, recognition. So, choice is a wonderful thing to have. But then choice is also paradoxical.

How much choice, do you want to have- look at the things that we perform on a daily basis, the choices that we make every day. So, for example if I have to buy a smartphone, how many choices I have in the market and are not these choices going to create a great amount of anxiety in me.

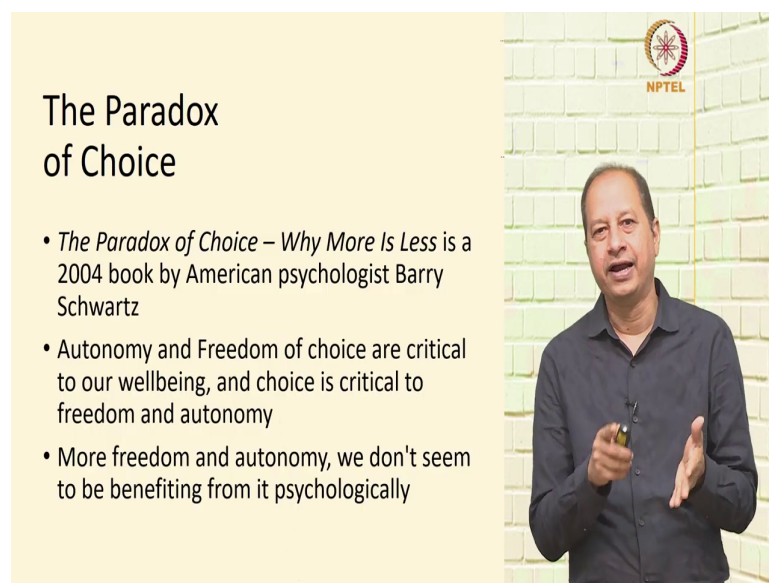
For example, if I decide a price range for my smartphone, within that price range, I will have several options, several choices and then I will begin to explore those choices and I will switch from one place, one device to the other to the other. I will seek guidance and help or

support from my peers, my family members, I will browse, I will research the internet to help me with my decision making process.

So, imagine how much time somebody is going to spend in the choice making process of buying a smart phone and that is the reason why it is very, very rightly said that multiple choices or several choices are paradoxical in nature. So, in this case much or more is less. And less is more in fact, if you do not have many choices, you will not have to experience as much anxiety as you will, when you have many choices, so, that is the difference.

So, this is the choice paradox or the Paradox of Choice presented to you diagrammatically. So, if you have multiple choices, that means it will lead to problems for you, the satisfaction level will drop. So, if you have fewer choices, that means limited choices, that is good for you, you will not experience much anxiety.

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The Paradox of Choice

- *The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less* is a 2004 book by American psychologist Barry Schwartz
- Autonomy and Freedom of choice are critical to our wellbeing, and choice is critical to freedom and autonomy
- More freedom and autonomy, we don't seem to be benefiting from it psychologically

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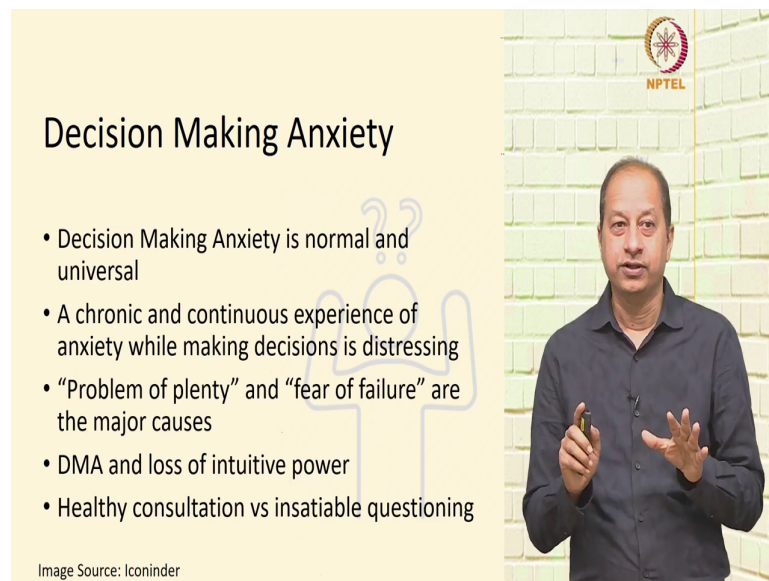
Now this idea is based on a wonderful book written by Barry Schwartz, American psychologist, the title of the book is, in fact, the Paradox of Choice. Why more is less, that means if you have more choices, it is less useful. If you have less choices, that is more useful. Because we all know that autonomy and freedom of choice are critical to our well-being, are critical. Otherwise, we will feel as if we are bogged down, we are limited, we do not have freedom. So, it is critical to our well-being, autonomy and freedom of choice.

By the same time, we also know that choice is critical to freedom and autonomy. So, they are complimentary to each other. So, freedom, choice, and autonomy are complementary, they

are interrelated ideas. So, freedom and choice and autonomy are crucial to our well-being. But the idea is more freedom and autonomy; we do not seem to be benefiting from it psychologically.

That is exactly what Barry Schwartz suggests, in his book. Says that we are not enjoying we are not, benefiting from more freedom and autonomy, psychologically, so that means the more freedom of autonomy that we have, are in fact, leading to more and more anxiety for us. So, this Paradox of Choice is a big reason for the heightened anxiety in our times.

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The slide features a yellow background with a white brick wall pattern on the right side. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and white design and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The title 'Decision Making Anxiety' is written in a bold, black font. Below the title, there is a list of five bullet points. To the right of the text, there is a blue outline of a person with two question marks above their head. At the bottom left, there is a small text credit: 'Image Source: Iconinder'. On the right side of the slide, a man in a dark blue shirt is speaking and gesturing with his hands.

## Decision Making Anxiety

- Decision Making Anxiety is normal and universal
- A chronic and continuous experience of anxiety while making decisions is distressing
- “Problem of plenty” and “fear of failure” are the major causes
- DMA and loss of intuitive power
- Healthy consultation vs insatiable questioning

Image Source: Iconinder

That brings us to the idea of decision making anxiety. So, the decision making process is fraught with anxiety. That is not unnatural; it is universal and natural. Because every time you know your decision will have reward or punishment, criticism or consequences, you are bound to experience anxiety, but then how exactly is that experience of anxiety going to affect you and your practices, your approaches.

So, decision making anxiety is normal as it is universal, everyone experiences decision making anxiety. But a chronic and continuous experience of anxiety while making decisions is distressing. If this becomes regularity with somebody, the person will experience anxiety on a regular basis, even while making decisions for everyday activities, everyday things for even less important things, and the person will begin to experience anxiety because it has become chronic.

So, a decision will invite anxiety automatically. Otherwise, there are several decisions that we make in our lives that do not experience anxiety and at times, it is also very, very subjective. It differs. For example, while picking my dresses for a certain day, I may not experience any anxiety, but there are people who experience a tremendous amount of anxiety while doing so. So, it is also subjective, and differs from person to person. But if it turns out to be chronic, it is going to cause trouble.

Now, this problem of plenty, we have already talked about it. Problems of plenty, paradox of choice and the fear of failure are the major causes of decision making anxiety. The problem of plenty, if I give you multiple choices, right in front of you and each of these choices appears to be a viable or viable alternative. That is definitely created. I mean, that is definitely going to create anxiety in you, because there are plenty of possibilities.

And at the same time, it is the fear of failure where I have equally important options, so alternatives right in front of me; I will experience anxiety because I will fear failure. What if I make this choice and I fail? What if I make that choice and I fail. So, fear of failure will loom large in my mind and that will teach, obstruct or hinder my decision making process.

And its decision making anxiety and loss of intuitive power, we all have this power in 3D power; sometimes we make decisions on the basis of this intuitive power. I will go with this choice. That is what my intuition tells me, my gut feeling tells me. So, if you experience decision making anxiety over a certain period of time, for a prolonged period, that will affect your intuitive power, as well.

And then finally, there is a difference between healthy consultation and insatiable questioning. We need to understand that, we come across people who consult everyone and everything, even for small decisions, unimportant or less important decisions. They consult everyone, they keep questioning. That is insatiable and that is a problem. That is a clinical condition. Someone needs to understand this difference between healthy consultation and insatiable questioning.

Healthy consultation, that means you are serious about it, you find somebody who knows that area well, then you have to rely on that person, that person's insight and experience and then you make your decision and you do not have to run from one place to another for a long, long

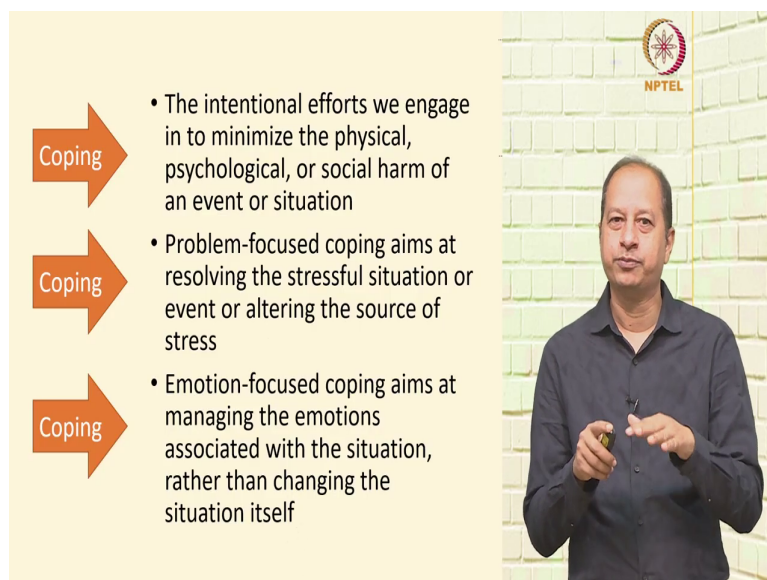
time and then keep questioning. So, the difference between healthy consultation and insatiable questioning needs to be understood.

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So, again two coping strategies. If you remember, I talked about the same things. While talking about our death anxiety, I will be bringing in this idea of coping strategies. Every time, I am going to focus on a literary composition, just to keep you posted, just to keep you reminded.

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So, the coping strategies we already know. So, these are the intentional efforts. If I do not have that intent, I will not make any efforts. So, these are the intentional efforts that we are engage in, in order to minimise the physical, psychological or social harm of an event or situation. So, these are intentional.

Now we come back again to the same idea problem focused coping and emotion focused coping. So, at the end of our discussion of each of these literary compositions, you decide on your own, whether it requires a problem focused coping or an emotion focused coping, because I have already talked about these two approaches.

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The Road Not Taken  
Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Cont.

Image Source: istockphoto

So, let us take a quick look at *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost and see how it struggles with decision making anxiety, how the speaker struggles with decision making anxiety and how by engaging with the speaker's struggle, we can in fact, derive some valuable insights, we can develop certain important coping skills and strategies that are employed successfully in this poetic composition.

So, there is two roads diverged in a yellow wood and that is going to give you a lot of anxiety because you are standing at the crossroad, you are standing at a point from where two roads are diverged and you know that both the roads are equally important or equally viable. Now that is going to you know embroil you in a lot of anxiety, you are going to experience anxiety for a prolonged period.

I must tell you that if you do not cut your anxiety shot, then you will find yourself in a frozen zone where you will not be able to act. So, these are some of the things that we will be focusing on when I walk you through these lines and let you know, how the coping skills and strategies used in this point are going to help us a lot.



So, if you have read this poem, you know this well, if you have not read this poem, you can read and try to understand its basic meaning, it is all about making a choice, life decision, a very important life decision. So, you have two choices and you do not have the option to go for both. You are a single traveller, you can make just one choice.

So, how exactly are you going to feel them and that is exactly what the speaker is feeling here and when we know that this choice is going to be life altering, since it is a life decision, we are bound to experience a great amount of anxiety and that is exactly what the speaker in this point is also experiencing.

So, the speaker goes on talking about it and the speaker does a few things. So, I will walk you through those ideas. The first thing is two roads, that means you are faced with a choice issue, paradox of choice. Imagine, if you had no choice, there was just one road, you would take it and you would not suffer from that anxiety.

So, you have two roads now, that means there is a choice issue and you are free to make that choice. When you know that you are free to make that choice, you are bound to experience anxiety, because your freedom of choice will bring visit an idea of responsibility, the burden of responsibility.

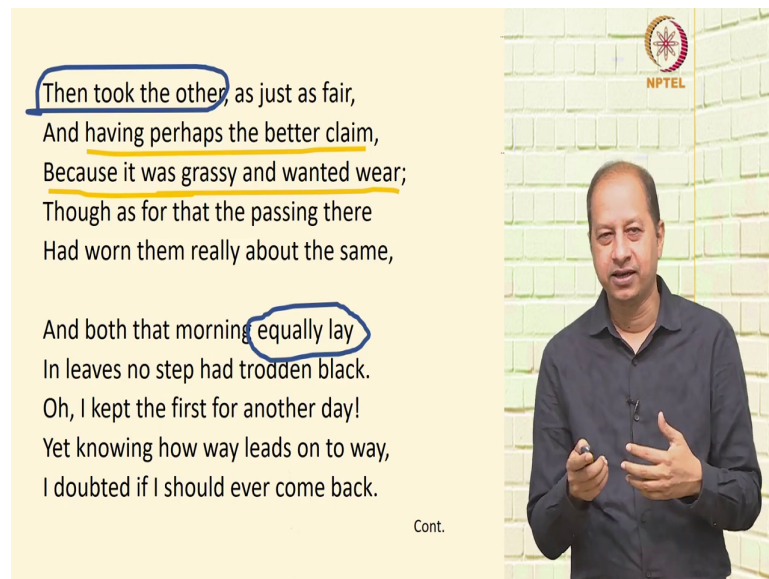
So, you are going to experience anxiety, two roads, diverged in a yellow wood and he expresses his inability that I could not travel both I am a single traveller, I could not have travel, I do not have that option, I am given two choices and I am asked to go for any one of those two choices. Therefore, I know that very, very well and then long I stood.

Now, this is a very, very important coping skill that we all need to develop in us. I will be talking about this particular coping skill after a while. But for now, you know that this is very, very important coping skill, I do not exactly know whether you have been able to figure it out or not yet, if you have not been able to do so, I am going to do it for you.

So, long I stood. Now, go back to two roads. I cannot take both long I stood, you can see a certain process, process from finding the choices, realising the limitations and then doing something and what is that something? Standing for a long time, long I stood and then you did not stand only while you are standing, you are doing something.

So, your standing is not necessarily an inertia position. You are doing something while you are standing and what exactly the speaker is doing, the speaker is looking down, the speaker is evaluating the options. So, the process is very, very clear, you have two choices or two options, you cannot take both, you stand for a long time and then you begin to assess and evaluate your choices or options.

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Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

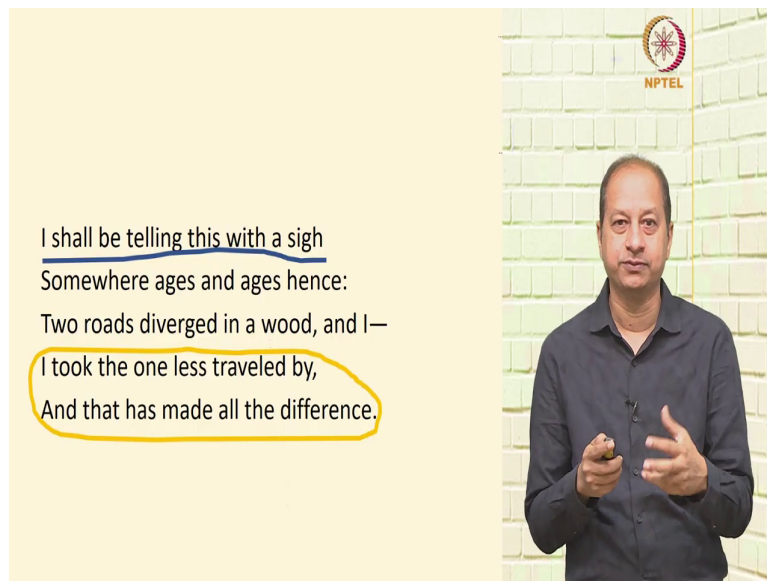
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And then we come to the next part of it. Then took the other. But before taking the other, you also evaluate the same thing. Therefore, the speaker is able to say it is just as fair props as the better claim. Because it was, so you have as just as fair, having perhaps the better claim; because now the speaker is trying to give reasons for his or her choice, the reasons for his choice, because this is a very, very important coping strategy.

This is how we cope with the burden of responsibility when we give our reasons, when you do something and you know that it might lead to failure or serious consequences. You became to give your reason for doing that so that the failure of it will not hurt you much and that is exactly what the speaker is also doing here.

Having perhaps made a claim and then because it was grassy, so giving reasons and then it comes back to the same question again, both of them are equally important. It is not that, one is good, the other is bad. There was no question of it at all. So, equal both of them, equally viable.

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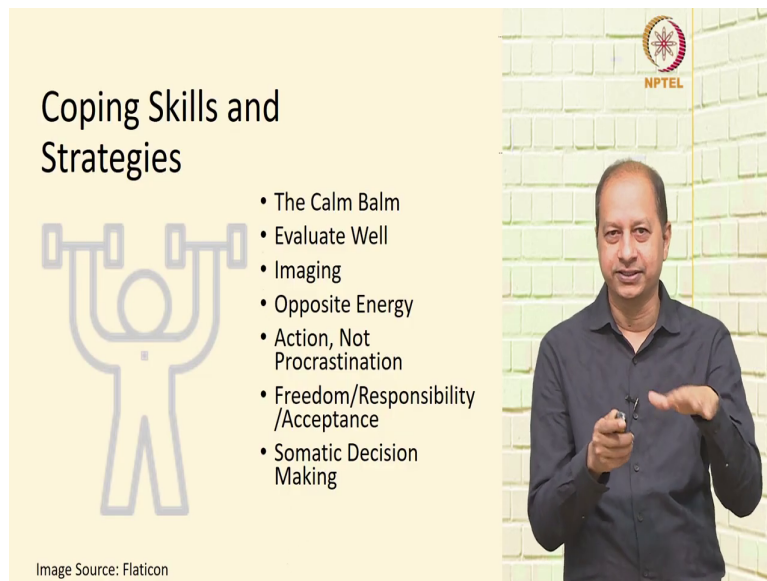


And then we come to the last segment, where he says I shall be telling this with a sigh. Now, this is very, very ambiguous, whether it is a sigh of relief or a sigh of regret, pain, we do not exactly know. But then the speaker leaves that to us. Whenever we make choices, as I have already told you, it is going to be extremely subjective. So, whether it is going to be a sigh of relief or a sigh of regret, is to be decided by us.

I took the one less travelled by and that has made all the difference, irrespective of what kind of difference it has made for the speaker, whether it has, given him success or failure, irrespective of that, the speaker accepts the fact that I took the one less travelled, but that was my decision, that was my choice.

So, when it comes to coping with anxiety, acceptance again plays a very, very important flow in the last lecture. While talking about death be not proud, I talked about this particular skill that works all through.

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The slide features a yellow background. On the left, there is a simple line drawing of a person with their arms raised. To the right of the drawing is a bulleted list of coping skills. Further right, a man in a dark blue shirt is speaking, gesturing with his hands. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a star and the text 'NPTEL' below it. At the bottom left, it says 'Image Source: Flaticon'.

## Coping Skills and Strategies

- The Calm Balm
- Evaluate Well
- Imaging
- Opposite Energy
- Action, Not Procrastination
- Freedom/Responsibility /Acceptance
- Somatic Decision Making

Image Source: Flaticon

So, when we come to the coping skills and strategies that are used in this poem, what exactly we get to see, we start with a Calm Balm, long I stood. So, whenever you are faced with a challenge, you experience the adrenaline rush, that is pumped inside you and then you experience anxiety and then in your anxiety, if you make a choice, there is every possibility that it will go wrong.

So, it is always a good idea to calm yourself. So, calming, actually works as bombing. Therefore, it is the calm balm, long I stood, when you do not know, you are agitated, you stand for a while, relax you also breathe and then you can begin to think about it. So, if you forget that particular thing for a moment and then begin to think about it again, after you have relaxed that will give you that much needed insight into that particular thing, so that is exactly what the speaker does. See, that is a skill we all need to develop and the poet tells us that this is an important skill. We also need to evaluate well and that is exactly what the speaker does here. Whenever there is a choice question, we need to evaluate. That is exactly what the speaker does. So, if I have a question in my mind, I have to evaluate it.

And then imaging. So, imaging is something that the speaker does extremely well in this, starts by using lots of metaphors, two roads are those choices or options that we have in life. So, this imaging helps you come to a real question and that is a very powerful skill, imaging skill.

Opposite energy can be used in order to overcome analysis paralysis. So, if you go on analysing the same thing for a long, long time, it is going to have paralytic effects in you. So, analysis paralysis can be avoided using opposite energy. That is exactly what the speaker does here and that is a very important skill. Long I stood, he could have stood for unending period, but he did not do that. I took the one.

So, suddenly, he switches to the action mode. So, inaction inertia mode to action mode, that is opposite energy and that helps the speaker overcome analysis paralysis. And then action, not procrastination. We all know that that is very important skill. Action, after some moment of inaction, is of course what we need. But procrastination, that particular moment of inaction should not, no result in procrastination, so that is exactly what the speaker does here.

So, that is an important skill and then I have already talked about freedom, responsibility and acceptance. The speaker does it all, freedom the speaker enjoys, the speaker knows well that it will, bring the burden of responsibility and all the speaker has to do is to accept it and that is a very, very important skill, we need to develop in us and the poetic composition tells us that.

And then finally, somatic decision making sometimes, when the executive brain the logical approach does not work, we can focus on somatic decision making skills and we allow our emotional side to do it for us and that is exactly what the speaker does this and that is the reason why he says, I shall be telling this with a sigh ages and ages hence, why should he tell this with a sigh, a sigh of relief or a sigh of grief or regret, that is going to be an emotional affair, after all. So, somatic decision making is also used as an important skill in this poetic composition.

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## References

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- Spielberger CD. *Anxiety: Current trends in theory and research: I.* Oxford, England: Academic Press; 1972.
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoaches-council>



And that is how we come to the end of this lecture. I am sure you have liked the ideas that I talked about. In the meanwhile, you can also explore a variety of other poems to discover the coping skills and strategies contained in those poetic compositions and thus enrich your idea of these concepts, so thank you very much for joining me.