

Sitting on the Fence

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“I don’t know what to do! We’ve been together forever, and I do love him, but I want more for my life than nights and weekends on the couch gaming or binge-watching! I can’t imagine leaving, but I can’t live like this anymore!”

Cindy had debated with herself for nearly a year about whether to stay in relationship with her boyfriend of many years. She was, in some ways, comfortable in the routine they had established together, but she noticed that she was feeling increasingly uninterested and dissatisfied with her life.

With my encouragement, she had begun participating in activities outside of the home, often invited him to join her, to no avail. Though she asked, he was unwilling to begin couple’s counseling, and he seemed irritated by her desire to try new things. Over time, it became clear that Cindy had a choice to make. She could stay in the relationship, understanding that it may always be the same at home, or she could leave the relationship not knowing exactly what to expect from life on her own. Cindy was sitting on the fence. Both pastures held interesting possibilities, but she couldn’t see the whole pasture from the fence. And she could see that both pastures had some bare patches, and even some cow pies. She was stuck sitting in an uncomfortable position, afraid to make either choice for fear she’d make the wrong one.

While there was no obviously right answer, we had done a variety of brainstorming and other exercises to help Cindy find ways to leave her emotions aside to look at the choice more rationally. She would seem to lean toward a decision, and then start second-guessing herself and wonder if she should change her mind.

Finally, as a thought experiment (not advice, just a what-if question), I suggested that we just flip a coin. Heads, she stays, tails, she goes. I suggested that this might be as effective as other methods we had tried, and it would certainly be quicker and less painful! In that moment, she realized that she didn’t want it to land on heads. She wanted to move on, she was just scared.

Many of us find ourselves facing decisions with no clear ‘right’ answer. There are benefits and trade-offs on both sides, so we find ourselves straddling the fence, unable to fully commit one way or the other. Sometimes we may step down and take tentative steps in one direction, but keep our hand on the fence just in case we made the wrong decision.

This is a decision of sorts, but in doing this, we give up the possibility of having a whole pasture to explore, and instead only get to know a piece of fence and maybe a bit of pasture on either side.

In the end, Cindy did move out and ended her relationship. The transition was hard at first, but she is settling into her new life, and learning new things about herself. For example, it turns out she likes to dance (especially salsa and swing) and is meeting lots of new people at dances. And she is so relieved to be off the fence! So, where do you need to hop down off a fence?

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