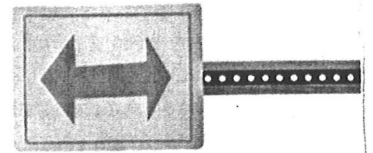


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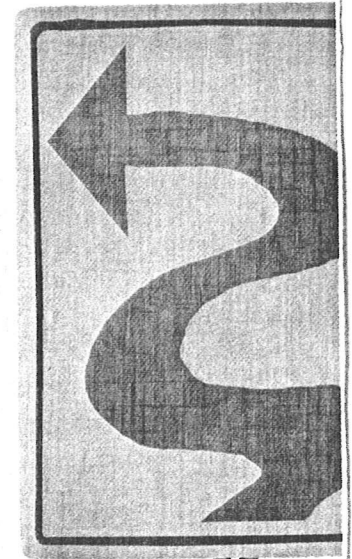
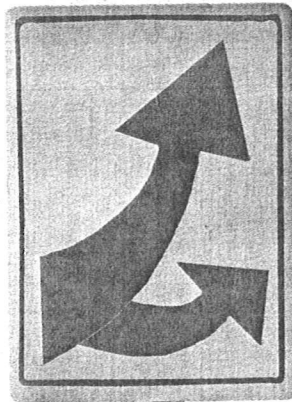
# SECOND-GUESSING

DO YOU QUESTION ALMOST EVERY DECISION YOU MAKE? GET BOGGED DOWN IN ALL THE WHAT-IFS? LEARN HOW TO END SELF-DOUBT FOR GOOD. **BY SARAH CROW**

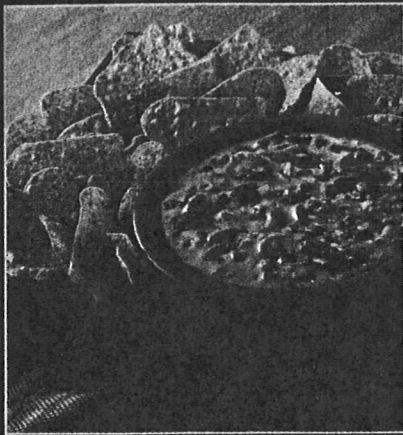
It should have been perfect—our first day in the marvelous old farmhouse we'd bought after months of planning. But we had barely stepped across the threshold when worry kicked in. *What have we done? We never should have moved here! It's too far from town, the kids will miss their friends, we'll go broke trying to fix it up...* and on and on. Instead of plunging ahead into our new life, I fell backward, second-guessing our decision to move and pining away for the home we'd left.

Sure, part of my doubting was plain old buyer's remorse, that *what did I do?* feeling most people get after making a big decision. Except that I seem to have buyer's remorse about every choice I make, whether it's the school I picked out for my son, or a hasty e-mail sent to my mother-in-law. And I get mired there, making myself totally miserable—and confusing and irritating my husband and family—as I go over and over the same turf.

Most people second-guess sometimes—"We should have ordered Chinese food, it would have gotten here faster." It's part of our ability to think and analyze. And a little bit of second-



Illustration, Leo Acacia/images.com.



## TOSTITOS® BRAND Veggie Cheese Dip

### Ingredients:

- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 2 c. quartered cherry tomatoes
- 1 1/2 c. roughly chopped fresh spinach
- 1/2 c. diced green bell pepper
- 1/2 c. diced red onion
- 2 1/2 c. diced button mushrooms
- 1 c. fresh sweet corn kernels  
(can substitute frozen corn)
- 1 15 1/2-oz. jar of TOSTITOS®  
Reduced Fat Zesty Cheese Dip
- 1 Tbsp. roughly chopped fresh parsley

### Directions:

Heat oil in nonstick pan over high heat.

Add tomatoes, spinach, peppers, onions, mushrooms and corn and sauté for four minutes.

Meanwhile, pour TOSTITOS® Reduced Fat Zesty Cheese Dip into a microwave-safe bowl and microwave for 30 seconds or until warm.

Remove bowl from microwave and stir in vegetables and parsley.

Serve immediately with TOSTITOS® Multigrain Tortilla Chips and a side of fresh broccoli florets.

Serves 4-6

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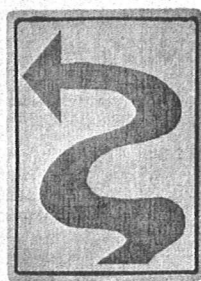
## health

guessing is actually a good habit, says Larina Kase, Psy.D., a psychologist in Philadelphia, because reflecting on past choices is how we are able to learn from them. "These lessons can be important sources of information for decisions you're making now," Dr. Kase says. "If you never second-guess a decision, you're liable to be sloppy and careless."

But getting stuck all the time means that you're getting in your own way—which is debilitating and exhausting. "I ask my patients, 'If you walked around

clution. Maybe you're wishing you could change the past—*If only I'd chosen the other school*. Or you might worry that you won't be able to cope with a problem—*I should never have accepted that extra assignment*. And you get immobilized by your own thinking, says Yale University professor Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Ph.D., author of *Eating, Drinking, Over-thinking* (Henry Holt). Women prone to ruminating tend to be less confident about their decisions, according to Dr. Nolen-Hoeksema. They feel less in control of their lives, and are

more prone to anxiety disorders and depression. **Work overload.** Sometimes second-guessing comes not from *how* we think, but from having *too much* to think about. A mile-long to-do list makes you anxious, which in turn clouds your thinking. Tense and worried, you focus more on the negative aspects of things—and



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your house looking over your shoulder, what would happen?" says Arthur Freeman, Ph.D., coauthor of *The 10 Dumbest Mistakes Smart People Make and How to Avoid Them* (HarperCollins). "You'd eventually trip over yourself or bump into a wall. You're not looking where you're going; you're looking where you've been."

### WHY WE DO IT

There are multiple reasons for a case of the relentless what-ifs. Here are the most common ones:

**Caring too much.** Being sensitive to what others think and feel does help you get along with them, but an excess of it can leave you tentative and indecisive. When focused on others' expectations, you may start to ignore your gut sense about a decision, which leaves you open to doubt.

**Overthinking.** Second-guessers tend to ruminate—to obsessively mull over a problem without ever coming to a con-

clusion. Maybe you're wishing you could jump to the conclusion that your decisions are bad ones.

**Running away.** Some people second-guess to avoid thinking about scarier things. "One woman I saw was facing financial difficulties, and because of that she and her husband were arguing more," Dr. Kase says. "She would second-guess every detail of her relationship with him, wondering whether they should even be together." But her real stress wasn't her husband, it was money.

**Perfectionism.** Fear of being wrong looms large for lots of women—they give themselves the unreachable goal of never, ever making a mistake. But in most decisions, there's no clear right or wrong. "Whether a decision is good or bad is often subjective," says Holly Hazlett-Stevens, Ph.D., author of *Women Who Worry Too Much* (New Harbinger). "With a big life decision, like whether or not to move, there are so many variables that you'll always have some trade-offs."

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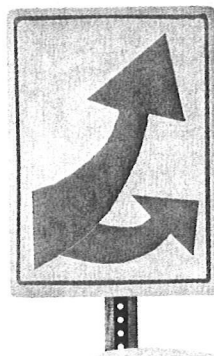
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The parent trap. Even fairly easygoing people can get caught up in questioning their parenting. First there's "comparisionitis"—checking your child's development or ability against another child's. You start by simply wanting to be sure your kid's on track, but then get so caught up that you lose sight of your own guiding values. Then there's all the advice. Whether it's an insistent new parenting book or another mom pushing you to sign up your kid for year-round hockey, there's usually someone telling you that you could be doing your

are very few situations where there's just one right choice; that means we have to live with some uncertainty.

2) Turn worry into action. "As you catch yourself second-guessing, acknowledge that yes, you have a lot of responsibilities, and yes, your life is complicated," says Dr. Hazlett-Stevens. If you've decided to take on that extra work assignment and are now worrying, *What if I can't do it?* acknowledge to yourself that you're in a bind. Then move right to, *What's the first step I can take to get this started?* This helps you move from worrying to problem solving.

3) Write it down. Pour out your worries in a notebook or journal, then put it away and move on to an activity that will lift your spirits. Go back and reread it later or the next day. Most likely, you'll find it's now easier to see what's troubling you, what you need to do



Exercise is a  
good way to  
slow down  
a brain  
that's in  
overdrive.

job differently. And finally, parenting trade-offs often involve important, long-term consequences that are unpredictable. Enter inner conflict. "Whenever my seventh-grader, Abigail, is in a bad mood, I wonder if it's because we decided to homeschool her," says Susanna Bartee of Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. "But then again, if she were in school full-time, I would worry that her bad mood was because of the pressures of being in middle school."

### KICK THE WHAT-IF HABIT

Had enough of self-doubt? The next time you're stuck in a second-guessing rut, take these steps:

1) Let go of the "right" decision. When you hear yourself using lots of "shoulds" (*I should never have agreed to organize the school carnival*), or "if only's" (*If only we'd chosen the other high school...*), that's a sign you're seeking perfection—which doesn't exist. There

and what you can put behind you.

4) Move your body. When your brain is in overdrive, exercise is one of the best ways to slow it down. Walking, biking and swimming are all good choices, but if you can find an activity that takes all your attention, like a challenging hike or a tennis game, you'll give your brain an even bigger rest.

5) Take a breather. Several times a day, retreat to a quiet place for a few minutes. "Do some deep breathing, check your muscles for tense spots to relax. If it helps, imagine a peaceful scene," says Dr. Hazlett-Stevens. When you're in a calmer, more centered state, negative thoughts are less likely to take hold. If you can't actually get away, at least take a few moments to drop your shoulders and be aware of your breathing.

6) Cut yourself some slack. If an old decision keeps nagging at you, gently remind yourself that you didn't have all the information then that you have now.

Each time the doubts intrude and begin to nag, tell yourself, *I did the best I could with what I knew at the time.*

7) Find benefits, even in mistakes. O.K., so you really blew it this time. It happens to everybody sometimes. But even the worst decisions and experi-

ences have lessons to teach you. See whether you can find something to learn from your disaster—even if it's just what to avoid in the future. Who knows, maybe today's mistake will give you just the insight you need to make a really good choice tomorrow! ●

## trust your gut

Without knowing why, you have a good feeling about a new co-worker, or you sense with just a glance that your friend has gotten some bad news. It's your instinct, your gut, your intuition—a mixture of conscious and unconscious knowledge leading you to a decision or feeling. Listening to your gut sense can clarify a decision or help you see the big picture, says Marcia Emery, Ph.D., author of *PowerHunch! Living an Intuitive Life (Beyond Words)*. That in turn will lead to decisions you'll feel better about. But if you're prone to self-doubt and second-guessing, you may be out of touch with your all-important intuition. How to tune back in:

**Notice physical cues.** As you're talking to your child's teacher, your stomach tightens; as you get ready for a meeting, your neck aches. "The body is an intuitive antenna that's giving us important messages," Dr. Emery says. Instead of discounting these sensations, make a mental note of them. You might not act on such small messages, but added to other pieces of information, they may lead you to a discovery or decision.

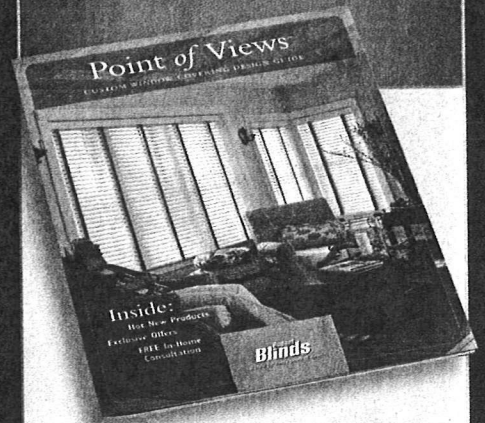
**Use your senses.** If you're deciding whether to take a new job, ask yourself: *Can I see myself in that office? How does the new title feel? What am I hearing? Does something not smell right?* Different people access their intuition through different senses, Dr. Emery says. Experiment to see which of yours are most useful.

**Track your hunches.** Jot them down, then go back and note your hits and misses. As you pay more attention to how well your intuition works, you'll trust it more, and it will grow stronger.

**Quiet the mental chatter.** The quickest way to hush that noisy committee in your head is to stay in the moment. Start with a simple, everyday activity, like brushing your teeth. "Do this very deliberately, noticing the feel of the bristles and the taste of the toothpaste," Dr. Holly Hazlett-Stevens suggests. "As your mind wanders off, notice that too, and bring it back to what you're doing." Expand this technique to other activities, and mindfulness will start to become a habit. The more in the moment you feel, the less you'll get lost in worries and regrets.

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