

Choices Under Pressure

Decision Making, Ethics, and Moral Reasoning

Subjects: Psychology, Civics, Ethics

Grade Level: 9–12

Activity Type: Movement-based simulation + discussion

Content Notice

This lesson references the events of September 11, 2001. Some students may find this topic emotionally difficult. Participation in the movement activity is optional. Students may opt out and complete a written alternative without penalty.

Scenario (Read Aloud)

The following scenario is based on real accounts from first responders on September 11, 2001. While specific details vary, the moral dilemma itself is real.

You are a first responder inside the second World Trade Center tower. The first tower has already collapsed, and the second tower has been struck. An official order comes over the radio stating that the building is likely to collapse.

Some first responders immediately begin evacuating the building. Others choose to continue moving deeper inside in an attempt to rescue additional civilians, fully aware of the danger.

You must decide what to do.

Decision Activity

When directed, close your eyes and imagine yourself in this situation.

When the teacher says **GO**:

- **Move LEFT** → You are evacuating the building
- **Move RIGHT** → You are continuing into the building to attempt additional rescues

There is **no correct answer**.

Group Discussion Questions

(Stay with the group you moved with.)

1. What was the moral choice in this situation?
 2. Why did you personally make the choice you did?
 3. How does this dilemma apply to everyday life, even when the stakes are not life-or-death?
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Key Insight (Do Not Skip)

Both choices are **moral choices**.

This activity is not about right vs. wrong — it is about **values, responsibility, risk, and human decision making under pressure**.

Optional Individual Reflection

Respond in writing (½–1 page):

What factors most influenced your decision? How did it feel to physically commit to a choice? What does this activity suggest about how people make decisions under pressure?

(Students who opted out should respond hypothetically.)

TEACHER-ONLY MATERIAL

(Psychology Tie-Ins + Debrief Script)

Psychology & Ethics Tie-Ins

You can explicitly connect this activity to multiple psychological frameworks:

1. Dual-Process Theory (System 1 vs. System 2)

- Many students make the decision **instantly**
- Highlights fast, emotional decision-making (System 1)
- Follow-up discussion engages slower, rational processing (System 2)

Debrief angle:

“Did you *think* first, or *move* first?”

2. Moral Reasoning (Kohlberg)

Students justify choices at different levels:

- **Stage 3:** “What would others expect of me?”
- **Stage 4:** “Following orders / duty”
- **Stage 5–6:** “Principles, human life, moral responsibility”

Debrief angle:

“Did your reasoning focus more on rules, people, or principles?”

3. Role Morality

- “I was just doing my job” vs. “I chose this”
- Professional obligation vs. personal survival

Debrief angle:

“How does having a role change moral expectations?”

4. Risk Perception & Availability Bias

- Students imagine collapse risk differently
- Media exposure affects perceived danger
- Personal fear tolerance varies widely

Debrief angle:

“Did you imagine the same level of danger as others?”

5. False Moral Dichotomy

The key psychological lesson:

The brain often tries to force *either/or* moral answers — reality doesn’t cooperate.

Teacher Debrief Script (Use or Adapt)

“Before we talk about *why* you chose what you chose, I want to be clear about something:

There was no immoral choice in this activity.

That was intentional.”

(Pause.)

“Many ethical problems in real life are not about right versus wrong.

They are about **conflicting goods.**”

“One choice prioritizes duty to others.

One choice prioritizes self-preservation and the ability to help later.

Both are morally defensible.”

(Ask the following aloud, not all at once.)

- “Who felt confident in their choice immediately?”
- “Who second-guessed themselves after moving?”
- “Did anyone want to switch groups once you saw where others went?”

“That discomfort you’re feeling right now — that’s the point of the lesson.”

“Everyday life is full of smaller versions of this:

speaking up or staying silent,

helping or protecting yourself,

taking a risk or playing it safe.”

“Ethics is not about having perfect answers.

It’s about understanding **why** we choose what we choose.”

Teacher Notes

- Do **not** ask students to defend their choice as “correct”
- Avoid moral ranking of groups
- Validate uncertainty
- Silence is a valid response

Why This Lesson Works

- Physical movement forces commitment
- Ambiguity disrupts black-and-white thinking
- Emotional engagement deepens retention
- Reflection converts experience into insight