



How to avoid decision fatigue

by April Kilcrease, November 8, 2017

You get home from work and your partner asks what you want to order for dinner. Somehow that simple question seems impossible to answer. You toss the choice back to them. And so the game of “I don’t care. You pick,” begins. What’s going on here? Why does take-out suddenly seem so complicated?

You’re likely experiencing decision fatigue, a syndrome most of us suffer from on a daily basis. The phenomenon zaps mental energy, promotes impulsivity over thoughtful deliberation, and can cause people to shut down and do nothing. Researchers have found that just as our muscles tire after repeatedly lifting weights, our brain tuckers out after making multiple decisions. Given that the average adult makes a whopping 35,000 decisions each day, it’s no wonder dinner decisions can seem so taxing.

Although selecting an entree isn’t particularly high-stakes, decision fatigue can have big consequences in other areas. It can lead otherwise reasonable people to snap at co-workers, spend the afternoon on an online shopping spree, or put off big decisions, creating institutional bottlenecks and even bigger problems later on.

Making decisions uses “the same willpower that you use to be polite or to wait your turn or to drag yourself out of bed or to hold off going to the bathroom,” psychologist Roy F. Baumeister, co-author of *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, told *The New York Times*. “Your ability to make the right investment or hiring decision may be reduced simply because you expended some of your willpower earlier when you held your tongue in response to someone’s offensive remark or when you exerted yourself to get to the meeting on time.”

Since even getting out of bed requires choosing to do so, how can any of us hope to preserve our willpower and mitigate decision fatigue?

Make important decisions in the morning

A study involving medical decisions found that doctors were more likely to prescribe unnecessary antibiotics for respiratory infections as their workday wore on. The doctors weren’t discovering renewed faith in these antibiotics later in their shifts. Rather, the mental work of evaluating patient after patient progressively impaired their ability to resist ordering inappropriate—albeit easy and safe—options.

To ensure you don’t unwittingly let reduced willpower negatively impact your work, focus on your most important projects early in the day when your cognitive resources are fresh. You’ll be better able to sort through complex problems and avoid making hasty decisions.

Use the power of routine

Stop wrestling with the same daily decisions. Even seemingly trivial questions—donut or bagel, bike or drive—chip away at your willpower. To combat this erosion, cultivate helpful routines. Plan your meals in advance so you don’t waste energy debating what to eat—or end up defaulting to a tasty but unhealthy choice. Rather than hemming and hawing over whether to go to the gym, set a workout schedule and stick with it. Eventually, your new routines will turn into fatigue-free habits, leaving you with more mental energy to make good decisions.



Limit your options

We tend to celebrate choice, but too many options can sometimes be more debilitating than liberating. From jams to chocolates, researchers have found that too many options of even the best things can lead to analysis paralysis or make us more likely to regret the decision we made.

One way to fight choice overload: eliminate options. Mark Zuckerberg and Barack Obama both famously simplified their wardrobes in an effort to save their decision-making power for more important things. While you might not want to don a gray T-shirt or blue suit every day, it's probably a good idea to narrow your selection whenever you can. For example, to combat the endless number of options on the internet, one psychology professor recommends limiting yourself to three websites when researching new purchases.

These sorts of constraints can lead to more creative ideas, too. Artists of all stripes have long used limitations to unleash new possibilities. Confined to only 50 words, Theodor S. Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss) wrote the classic children's book *Green Eggs and Ham*. His publisher, Bennett Cerf, had bet Geisel \$50 that he couldn't do it after he struggled with *The Cat in the Hat*, which used 225 words. And according to legend, when Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a story in six words, he penned: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn." Decades later, the tale inspired an entire book of six-word memoirs.

Don't second-guess yourself

Let go of your perfectionist impulses and embrace the idea of "good enough." Rather than agonizing over whether or not Futura is an overused font or if the shade of green you chose is too grassy, trust your decision and move on. Repeatedly questioning your choices only leads to making more decisions and reduces your decision-making resources.

Releasing the pressure to make the very best choice may also make you happier. Researchers have found that people who "satisfice," or search only until they find an option that meets their criteria, feel good about their decisions. On the other end of the spectrum, "maximizers," who weigh every option before choosing, often end up feeling worse about the outcome and tend to be more depressed than satisfied.

Have a snack

Never try to make important decisions on an empty stomach. Just like the rest of your body, your brain gets energy from glucose. Researchers found that when your brain is low on glucose, it "responds more strongly to immediate rewards and pays less attention to long-term prospects." However, if you stop for a snack, your depleted brain will bounce back. When asked to make financial decisions after downing some sugary lemonade, participants in the study resisted quick payoffs and made more rational choices.

For better or worse, making decisions is a fact of life. However, with some strategic scheduling and effective habits, you can protect your cognitive resources, leaving you with more creative energy for the decisions that matter most.