



e-quilibrium

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Decisions, Decisions

Although a sizeable proportion of human behavior can be characterized as automatic responses to environmental cues, making intentional decisions is ever-present in life. Some decisions can be relatively simple (e.g., which socks to put on), while others are very complex (e.g., hiring one employee from among dozens of desirable candidates). Some jobs or life circumstances involve more decisions than do others.

Making decisions requires energy. The self-control research indicates that making decisions draws upon the same resource as does managing one's behavior and one's emotions. In fact, studies have indicated that making decisions can reduce the self-control available for other tasks.

Decision fatigue is a term used to describe the state that can occur after many and/or difficult decisions have been made, so that subsequent decisions are not as carefully made. Decision fatigue results in a bias toward easier choices. For example, judges have been found to be less likely to grant parole (a more difficult decision than to deny parole) late in a court session than when they are more refreshed. Decision fatigue can also result in riskier decisions, and has been suggested as one explanation for why high-ranking executives or politicians have sometimes made very poor decisions regarding their personal behavior at great cost to their careers and families. For people in general, irritability and interpersonal conflict are more likely among decision-fatigued individuals, due to depleted self-control.

Health behavior choices can be affected by decision fatigue. When mentally tired, opting for fast food may be an easier choice than finding and making a healthy recipe for the evening meal. The self-control depletion associated with decision fatigue decreases that likelihood that one will follow-through with an exercise plan. With respect to physical exertion, decision fatigue has been shown to reduce physical stamina and pain tolerance.

There are ways to decrease exposure to decision fatigue. A number of decisions are insignificant enough that they deserve very little attention, so that one's decision-making energy can be reserved for more important choices. Some decisions can be delegated to others. Following routines and establishing habits eliminates the necessity of some decisions. Use of decision aids, such as reviews of consumer products when choosing an item to buy, can ease the decision-making burden, in part by reducing the number of options being considered. Advance planning is a way to "take decisions off the table." That is, making choices or plans when one is fresher is a way to minimize decisions that otherwise would be made in a state of decision fatigue. This is why having and following a grocery list, scheduling exercise, and pre-planning responses for tempting situations increases the probability that healthier choices will be made.

An important caveat to the science of decision fatigue is that there is also evidence that beliefs about such a concept can themselves impact the phenomenon. In other words, the person who believes their willpower is depleted is more likely to exhibit decision fatigue than is an individual who doesn't perceive this to be happening. Furthermore, motivation certainly plays a role, so that a highly motivated individual can be more resilient in the face of depletion. However, the effect of mindset has limits, so that at some point, sufficient depletion will affect the behavior of anyone, no matter what their beliefs or motivation.

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