



Avoiding Decision Fatigue

Decisions are the foundation of our daily lives. They consist of information input, analysis, and course of action that will lead to a certain desired objective. Should I get up or press snooze? What should I eat? Should I look for a new job out-of-state to save money? From small to life-altering, decisions are inevitably a part of our daily routine.

DECISION-MAKING BASICS

Some decisions are easy and some are incredibly complicated. To support the more complicated decisions, there are decision-making styles and strategies we employ to come to a conclusion or to take specific action:

- 1| **Impulsiveness** – choose the first or easiest option you have and be done with it
- 2| **Compliance** – Choose the most pleasing or comfortable option. This is often highly influenced by popular choice and those you are most influenced by
- 3| **Delegating** – Push the decision onto others to save you the trouble or burden of choosing
- 4| **Avoidance/deflection** – Avoiding or ignoring decisions in an effort to avoid responsibility for the decision's impact OR to simply prevent the decision from overwhelming you
- 5| **Balancing** – Weigh the factors involved, study them, and use the information to make the most informed decision in the moment. Often considered as a pros/cons weigh in
- 6| **Prioritizing/Reflecting** – Putting the most energy, thought and effort into those decisions that will have the most impact

REFLECT: Which decision-making styles do you use most frequently at work? At home? Are they the same or different when making decisions for your health and wellness?

DECISION FATIGUE

Our brains have a maximum daily decision-making capacity. Think of it like a muscle: with extended use, muscle fatigue occurs. Brains have a similar tendency after extended decision-making processes. We have finite mental energy, and with repeated decision-making, that energy gets depleted. This is called “decision fatigue.” In fact, research suggests that “individuals experiencing decision fatigue demonstrate impaired ability to make trade-offs, prefer a passive role in the decision-making process, and often make choices that seem impulsive or irrational.”¹

According to social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister, there is also a finite store of mental energy for exerting self-control. Therefore, the more fatigued you are, the harder it is to make health-promoting decisions like choosing nutrient-dense foods over highly palatable but less nutrient-dense or putting your running shoes on and hitting the pavement after work. This is a huge factor in why diets so often fail. Your personal situation that influences your daily decision fatigue threshold (and subsequent self-control energy) is a huge determinant in decisions regarding health-promoting and goal-supportive behavior.

CONSIDER: How many decisions do you make each day regarding food?

Research out of Cornell suggest that out of the estimated 35,000 decisions you make each day, over 200 of them are on food alone. So it is no wonder that by the end of the day often the easiest decision is to choose the food that does not require prep work, that is highly palatable but not usually nutrient-dense, or that may not align with the vigor you felt that morning about your health goals. You have met your quota of decision-making for the day. The research supports this because we know that repetitive significant decision-making leads to a state where “emotion rises, intellect falls, resulting in impulsivity.” ²

STEPS TO AVOID HEALTH DECISION FATIGUE

- 1 | Start your day with goal alignment. Take 5 minutes in your normal morning routine to mentally scan your 1-2 health goals for the day.
- 2 | Automate reminders throughout your day. Put out a post-it near your coffee pot or on the back of your phone so you do not need to carry the mental reminder of your goals, you have a physical one to keep the goal present.
- 3 | Calendarize your movement. Put your walks and workouts into your calendar at the beginning of each week like you would a work meeting or a hair appointment
- 4 | Prep your food ahead of time. Create a meal plan for the week and shop on dedicated days. Choose goal-supportive snacks to have on hand BEFORE you get ravenous

5| Add in a little friction for health-depletive behaviors and make health-supportive behaviors easier. For example, switch the nutrient-dense snacks to eye-level or below and put the candy and desserts above eye-level

6| Create a process for minor and major decision-making. This could include always using a pros/cons list, consulting a trusted friend, allocating a specific scheduled time for rumination, and/or giving yourself permission to “fail forward.”

RESOURCES

1 | Tierney, J. (2011). Do you suffer from decision fatigue. The New York Times, 17.

2 | A. L. Coley (2002). Affective and cognitive processes involved in impulse buying (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia).