

# Research Brief

## Decision-Making Fatigue

**Question:** What is decision-making fatigue?  
What do the implications for principals and how do you minimize decision fatigue?

### Summary of Findings:

#### In a Nutshell

Decision fatigue is a term that describes the deterioration in quality of decisions made by a person particularly later in the day and after time making complex decisions. It recognizes that during the day a person may deplete their mental energy thus impacting their ability to make rational decisions. It can result in poorer decisions later in the day.

Decision fatigue can cloud one's judgment leading to poor choices. It explains a whole set of undesirable behaviors such as losing focus in meetings, getting angry with colleagues, being impulsive or making irrational decisions without considering the consequences (Green, 2011).

### Implications of Decision Fatigue

Decision fatigue is a concept that suggests that decision makers have a finite store of energy for use in making decisions. As their energy is depleted their ability to handle both routine and complex decision-making declines. This may lead to distinct differences in decisions during different parts of the day.

When one experiences decision fatigue they often don't feel physically tired, so one is not aware that fatigue is occurring. But declining mental energy has several implications for leaders and several effects of decision fatigue have been identified.

**Reduced Ability to Decide Between Choices** – Decisions where options exist can be energy-consuming as the decision-maker analyzes both the benefits and costs of each option. People with depleted energy may become reluctant to make trade-offs or they may make poor decisions.

**Decision Paralysis** – Decision fatigue can also lead decision makers to simply not make decisions. Lyengar and Lepper (2000) found that when people faced multiple choices when purchasing an item, they often found it difficult to purchase anything at all.

**Impulse Decisions** – Decision fatigue has also be connected to impulsive decisions. Later in the day the brain looks for shortcuts and acts impulsively rather than expending even more energy to make a decision. A Florida State researcher found a link between impulse decisions and low glucose levels and that when the decision-maker replenished the glucose they restored their ability to make more effective decisions.

**Impaired Self-Regulation** – There is some evidence that decision-making may drain some of a person's internal resources leaving them less capable of handling other activities. Loewenstein (2003) reported that the ability of decision makers to control impulses in their private lives may stem from the burden of day-to-day decision making.

## Avoiding Decision Fatigue

While decision fatigue cannot be avoided, several strategies for minimizing the effect have been identified.

- **Recognize it is a problem** – Don't minimize the problem or believe that you are immune to the effects. Monitor your behavior and the decisions you make and plan accordingly.
- **Plan your day** – Once you recognize the effect of decision fatigue, schedule your day so that important meetings or decisions occur early in the day. An alternative is to hold the meeting or make the decision following lunch or a mid-day break.
- **Avoid back-to-back meetings** – Avoid the tendency to schedule consecutive meetings. Take a break between meetings so that you can have a short break and recharge your mental energy reserves. Use the time between meetings to get up, move around, and do things that do not require complex decision-making.
- **Take short mental breaks** – As noted earlier, recognize the importance of taking breaks and schedule them throughout the day. Pause and let the mind relax and recover. Take a short walk or stretch break. Eat a healthy snack, drink plenty of water and breathe deeply.
- **Sleep on it** – If important decisions cannot be made in the morning you may want to “sleep on it” and reconsider the decision in the morning.
- **Have clear goals** – Decision fatigue is linked to making complex choices among alternatives. Be clear about your goals so that it minimizes unnecessary choices and the drain on mental energy associated with decision-making.

## Resources:

**Do You Suffer from Decision Fatigue** – By John Tierney (2011)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/do-you-suffer-from-decision-fatigue.html?pagewanted=all>

This article describes the concept of decision fatigue and how it may impact decisions based on the time of day.

**Mind Over Mind: Decision Fatigue May Deplete Our Willpower** –

<http://healthland.time.com/2011/08/23/mind-over-mind-decision-fatigue-may-deplete-our-willpower-but-only-if-we-let-it/#ixzz1WRGhCTM0>

This article describes how decision-making can erode a person's willpower and their impulse control.

**Avoiding the Dreaded Decision Fatigue** – By Holly Green (2011)

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2011/09/07/avoiding-the-dreaded-decision-fatigue/>

This article from Forbes discusses ways that decision makers can avoid decision fatigue.

**How to Avoid “Decision Fatigue”** – By Andrea Bennett (2011)

<http://responsibility-project.libertymutual.com/blog/how-to-avoid-decision-fatigue-#fbid=82j5Oa7Acfq>

Strategies for avoiding decision fatigue are discussed in this article.

**Choice Fatigue: The Effect of Making Previous Choices on Decision Making**

By Ned Augenblick and Scott Nicholson (2009)

[http://www.stanford.edu/~ned789/Choice\\_Fatigue.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~ned789/Choice_Fatigue.pdf)

This article discusses “choice fatigue,” the impact of making previous choices on a person’s decision making.

**Why You Need to Sleep On It – John Tierney. (2011)**

<http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/17/why-you-need-to-sleep-on-it/>

This blog discusses the link between willpower and decision fatigue.

**Print Resources:**

Baumeister, R. (2003). The psychology of irrationality. In Brocas, I and Carrillo, J. *The psychology of economic decisions: Rationality and well being.*

Baumeister, R. & Tierney, J. (2011). *Willpower: Rediscovering the greatest human strength.* New York: Penguin Press.

Loewenstein, G. (2003). *Time and decision: economic and psychological perspectives on intertemporal choice.*

Vohs, K., Baumeister, R., Twenge, J., Schmeichel, B., Tice, D & Crocker, J. *Decision fatigue exhausts self-regulatory resources ---but so does accommodating to unchosen alternatives.*

**Related Research Briefs:**

Decision-Making - <http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/DecisionMakingEPI.pdf>

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