

COPING WITH DECISION FATIGUE

Most people assume they make good decisions most of the time. But a new body of research reveals a phenomenon called “decision fatigue,” which means the more decisions you make during the course of a day, the more likely you are to make a bad decision.

This tool explains how decision fatigue works – and how to mitigate its effects.

In the August 21, 2011 edition of The New York Times, John Tierney says that scientists have shown that once you become “ego depleted” you become unwilling to make complex decisions that involve tradeoffs and compromises.

Ego depletion has implications for anyone in a management role. Do you schedule back-to-back meetings all day long? You’ll be more prone to decision fatigue than if you break up your meetings with walks around the office. Do you make your toughest decisions late in the day? If so, you’re more likely to make decisions based on impulse.

Ego depletion leaves you vulnerable to marketers who know how to take advantage of it. For example, if you’re buying a new car, a clever sales person knows that if he waits until the end of the sales process, he just might get you to bite on the “special 5-year extended warranty.”

Or take supermarkets. Marketers know that as you wander down aisle after aisle, making decision after decision, you are suffering decision fatigue. Putting impulse items at the checkout lane is their way of taking advantage of how you feel.

Are there ways to mitigate decision fatigue? Tierney writes that there are. Taking breaks, eating food, or sharing a joke with colleagues can help you pace yourself and improve the quality of your decision-making.

Food is particularly important – especially glucose. When glucose is low, research shows that the brain shuts down complex processing functions and activates the areas of the brain that respond to immediate rewards. This explains why decision fatigue is particularly tough for people on a diet – and why people with strong willpower in other parts of their life can have such a tough time losing weight. People on a diet are supposed to avoid the very substance that they need to stick with the diet!

In the days before supermarkets and online shopping, there were fewer decisions and less decision fatigue. Today, we feel overwhelmed because we routinely face so many choices. The bottom line? Pay attention to the effects of ego depletion and remember:

- Schedule your toughest decisions early in the day.
- If a major decision must be made late in the day, don’t make it on an empty stomach.
- Take frequent breaks for rest and healthy food.