

# Your Step-by-Step Guide to Conquering “Decision Fatigue”



Life is like a box of chocolates: full of decisions.

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After my first day of work in a new city, I found myself sprawled facedown on the carpet of my new apartment. I needed to buy a couch, to finish writing assignments from my last job, to walk the dog—but after deciding which route to take between home and work, choosing a health insurance plan, and setting up a dozen new account passwords, I was totally useless. My husband asked me what I wanted to eat for dinner, and I didn’t care, as long as I didn’t have to think up a menu. It turns out there’s a scientific explanation for what I was experiencing: *decision fatigue*.

The name is self-explanatory; constant decision-making can be overwhelming. Think about something as simple as grocery shopping after work. Do you get the organic berries at \$7 or the nonorganic at \$4? Which style of pasta? Which brand of juice? If you’re like me, you only manage to pick out a few things before you get cranky.

It may seem liberating to live in a land of infinite choices, but research in decision-making suggests otherwise. In [a classic study](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/productivity/2014/10/decision_fatigue_ego_depletion_how_to_make_better_decisions.single.html), Stanford researchers set up shop at an upscale grocery store chosen

for its “extraordinary selection” of items, including 300 types of jam. One Saturday afternoon, they set up a sampling booth with 24 jams; on the next Saturday, they did the same but with just six jams.

They found that people did seem to like the idea of having a lot of choices: More customers approached the 24-jam booth than the six-jam one. But people visiting the 24-jam booth tended to try only one or two jams—the same number as people in the six-jam group. When it came to buying jam, people in the hella-jams condition shut down, exhibiting what researchers call choice paralysis; only 3 percent bought any jam, whereas 30 percent of people in the six-jam booth took home a jar. From this study, the researchers coined a theory, aptly called choice overload.

The same researchers ran a similar study with chocolates, where people were asked to choose just one chocolate from either 30 choices or six. They found that people in the 30-chocolate group were more likely to experience regret about the choice they made. Still more research has found that repeated decision-making also leads to decreased self-control.

Making decisions isn’t the only daily activity that can wear you down. It’s what you *aren’t* doing that can exhaust you, too. Maintaining self-control takes subconscious thought and effort—the box of donuts in the break room you’re resisting is a low-level distraction throughout your day. As [one group of researchers](#) put it: “Just as a muscle gets tired from exertion, acts of self-control cause short-term impairments in subsequent self-control.” Researchers call this ego depletion, referring to Freud’s “ego”: the moderate, socially acceptable version of ourselves that mediates between the superego and the id.

Scientists have tried a variety of tasks to deplete people’s self-control: asking them to hide their feelings after watching an emotional film, to avoid thinking about a white bear, or to resist desserts. They found that exerting self-control has effects on even seemingly unrelated tasks, such as stamina when squeezing a handgrip, whether people can stifle an inappropriate laugh, and how long they work on solving a frustrating problem.

People who are ego-depleted or decision-fatigued are looking for ways to get out of having to exert more self-control or make decisions, so they tend to be passive instead of active. In [one cruel study](#), researchers made a group of participants do an incredibly pointless and ego-depleting task: Cross out all the instances of e in a document, as long as it was more than one letter away from another vowel. (*Meal* is a no; *vowel* is a no; but *mechanical* would be a yes.)

After that mind-numbing labor, participants were told that they would need to watch a video, but could stop it at any time to watch a clip of [Saturday Night Live](#). The video was insanely boring—literally footage of a plain white wall. One group had to press a button to stop the video; the other had to hold down a button to keep watching the video. The button-pressers watched the boring video for a longer amount of time—in other words, people were so ego-depleted that even pressing a button felt like a lot of work. No wonder Netflix’s automatic “play next episode” function is so popular.

Making decisions and exhibiting self-control are unavoidable daily activities; getting overwhelmed and sometimes making bad, impulsive decisions are occupational hazards of being human. But simple

awareness of how to conserve your limited resources can help you stay productive throughout the day.

First, get the important things out of the way early on in the day, before you've reached your frustration threshold or gotten distracted by break-room crullers. Checking off your to-do list when your cognitive resources are fresh is a good strategy for avoiding rash decisions.

Next, decrease your range of options. This may seem counterintuitive, since it requires making *even more decisions*. For instance, if you're picking a restaurant for an important lunch meeting, first deciding on a certain part of town or type of cuisine can narrow your options. Like the participants in the jams study, you're less likely to be paralyzed by choice if you have few options instead of dozens.

Once you've arrived at a decision, stick with it. Ignore the naysaying voice in your head asking if this is the mutual fund that will make you the most money in 15 years or if the route your GPS gave you is the most gas-efficient. Just accept that no decision is ever completely perfect, and remind yourself that it is the best you can do with the tools you have in the moment. Second-guessing yourself only requires making more decisions, which further depletes your cognitive resources. You might also end up happier; [researchers have found](#) that people who "satisfice," or pick an option that meets requirements, are more content with their choices than people who try to pick the *best* option.

To limit the number of options you can consider, set a self-imposed time limit for decision-making. If you're buying a new laptop bag, you could spend an infinite amount of time studying features and optimizing price and value—but if you give yourself only five minutes to make a decision, there are only so many bags you can consider. You'll save time, and, if the research findings hold up in real life, you'll be happier with your decision, too. For less important tasks, consider outsourcing your decision-making. If you're wondering whether to hit the gym after work or call a client, let someone else make the decision for you. I use [a simple yes/no generator](#): Think of a question, hit a button, and the website spits out a randomly generated yea or nay.

After all that decision-making, give yourself a break. Remember that productivity decreases over time, and try to replenish your depleted ego by indulging your id. Walk away from your desk. Splurge on a \$6 coffee drink. Watch YouTube videos of [puppies on Roombas](#). Take a long lunch and come back fresh. If self-control is like a muscle, taking a rest can refuel your supply.

Changing your beliefs may actually make you more productive, too. Some [researchers believe that the notion of ego depletion is all in your head](#), and that rejecting the idea of self-control as a muscle can combat its effects. People who instead believe that self-control is an infinite resource are less likely to show effects of ego depletion—they actually show *increased* performance on self-control tests after completing boring, ego-draining tasks like crossing out e's from a document. Even weirder, how you feel about [free will](#) also affects your productivity: The more strongly you believe in it, the more likely you are to enjoy making decisions and to be happy with your choices. My apologies, readers, but your best bet at boosting your productivity may actually be to disregard what you've learned in this article.

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