

<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/improvisations/2011/08/31/impulsive-indecisive-you-may-have-decision-fatigue/>

Impulsive? Indecisive? You May Have “Decision Fatigue”

Researchers who analyzed more than 1,100 decisions by a parole board found this startling statistic: “Prisoners who appeared early in the morning received parole about 70 percent of the time, while those who appeared late in the day were paroled less than 10 percent of the time.”

That stat opens a long and engaging piece by John Tierney in the August 21 *New York Times Magazine* on what he calls “decision fatigue”:

The mental work of ruling on case after case, whatever the individual merits, wore them down. This sort of decision fatigue can make quarterbacks prone to dubious choices late in the game and C.F.O.’s prone to disastrous dalliances late in the evening. It routinely warps the judgment of everyone, executive and nonexecutive, rich and poor.



Too many decisions leaves our brains tired, writes author John Tierney.

Image courtesy of Flickr user [abardwell](#).

In “[Do You Suffer From Decision Fatigue?](#)” Tierney lays out the current thinking.

It goes like this: As the day wears on, and choices keep coming at you, “the harder each one becomes for your brain, and eventually it looks for shortcuts, usually in either of two very different ways.”

The first shortcut our brain takes: impulsiveness. Acting without fully putting the energy into thinking about consequences.

The second shortcut: inertia. As Tierney puts it, “instead of agonizing over decisions, avoid any choice. Ducking a decision often creates bigger problems in the long run, but for the moment, it eases the mental strain.”

Decision fatigue, he notes, has implications for customer relationships. Consumers can be manipulated to give in to recommendations if presented with a long series of options. Consider this experiment Tierney relates, when customers were given the opportunity to order options for their new cars at German car dealerships:

The car buyers — and these were real customers spending their own money — had to choose, for instance, among 4 styles of gearshift knobs, 13 kinds of wheel rims, 25 configurations of the engine and gearbox and a palette of 56 colors for the interior.

As they started picking features, customers would carefully weigh the choices, but as decision fatigue set in, they would start settling for whatever the default option was. And the more tough choices they encountered early in the process — like going through those 56 colors to choose the precise shade of gray or brown — the quicker people became fatigued and settled for the path of least resistance by taking the default option. By manipulating the order of the car buyers’ choices, the researchers found that the customers would end up settling for different kinds of options, and the average difference totaled more than 1,500 euros per car (about \$2,000 at the time). Whether the customers paid a little extra for fancy wheel rims or a lot extra for a more powerful engine depended on when the choice was offered and how much willpower was left in the customer.

What to do? Tierney suggests putting off decisions and **sleeping on it** when you hit burn out, whenever that is in your day. “The truly wise,” he quips, “don’t restructure the company at 4 p.m.”

Tierney is a science columnist for the *Times*, and his essay was adapted from his upcoming book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (Penguin Press HC, 2011), co-authored with Roy F. Baumeister. It’s due out September 1.