

Are you suffering *decision fatigue*?

Research shows that on average, teachers will make more than 1500 educational decisions every school day. That's more than four decisions every minute!

'Decision Fatigue' is an area currently being researched at Stanford University. Researchers have found that constantly having to make decisions creates fatigue and puts us at risk of making poorer decisions later in the day. As we become more mentally tired we start acting impulsively.

Author of the book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, Roy Baumeister believes that this explains "*why ordinarily sensible people get angry at colleagues and families, splurge on clothes, buy junk food and can't resist the dealer's offer to rustproof their new car. No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can't make decision after decision without paying a biological price.*"

The more decisions that you have to make during the day, the more difficult each one becomes. Tough decisions and those that involve considering lots of options lead us more quickly into '*Decision fatigue*'. Big decisions, small decisions, they all add up. It therefore isn't surprising that at the end of the day we are less patient and more likely to over react.

When we become mentally tired we start to look for short-cuts. Later in the day we either act impulsively by making a quick decision to conserve mental energy and move on or we avoid making a decision and do nothing. Whilst avoiding making a decision initially saves some energy and mental strain, it often leads to further problems of avoidance and procrastination.

In the 19th century it was believed that the brain was like a muscle and would be fatigued by use. Whilst this has subsequently been shown to be incorrect, there does appear to be a finite store of mental energy for exerting self-control.

The body's glucose level appears to have a direct link with our self-control and capacity to make good decisions. Diminished glucose levels led to impulsive decisions and behaviour. Whilst "*a sugar filled snack or drink will provide a quick improvement in self-control, it is just a temporary solution. It's better to have a steady supply throughout the day of glucose that you get from eating proteins and other more nutritious foods.*"

According to Baumeister, "*Even the wisest people won't make good choices when they're not rested and their glucose is low. The best decision-makers are the ones who know when NOT to trust themselves.*"

Schools are busy places and all staff who work in schools make numerous decisions every day. Being self-aware that our mental reserves are depleted and we may be experiencing *decision fatigue* can help us to avoid being impulsive and to take personal action to reinstate our glucose levels.

I believe this research also has important implications for meetings in schools. It helps explain why staff meetings after school can be so difficult and why providing some food at the start of the meeting is not only good for staff morale but also for the quality of the discussions.

Working in schools can be stressful!

These articles are intended to help the great people who work in schools to reduce their stress and increase their sense of satisfaction from the important work they do. Your feedback is welcome!

Key points

Constantly having to make decisions creates fatigue

Tough decisions lead us more quickly into '*Decision fatigue*'.

Diminished glucose levels lead to impulsive decisions and behaviour.

Teachers make more than 1500 educational decisions every school day.

Try and fail, but don't fail to try.

Stephen Kaggwa

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