

The Decision Fatigue Protocol

CALM VERITAS · EVIDENCE-BASED WELLNESS

Decision fatigue is the measurable decline in decision quality after a long session of choosing. It is not a metaphor — it shows up in real-world outcomes with real stakes, and it responds to structural fixes more reliably than willpower.

THE RESEARCH

A 2011 study by Danziger, Levav, and Avnaim-Pesso, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, analyzed over 1,100 parole board rulings. Favorable rulings started near 65% at the beginning of each session and dropped to nearly 0% right before a food break, then jumped back to 65% immediately after. The judges were not becoming harsher people over three hours — they were depleting a finite resource for effortful choice, and defaulting to the easiest ruling: denial.

Roy Baumeister's ego depletion research, published across multiple studies from the 1990s onward, found that self-control and decision-making draw on a shared, limited resource. Making one effortful choice measurably reduces performance on the next, unrelated self-control task — a pattern replicated across dozens of early studies, though later large-scale replication efforts found the effect is smaller and more context-dependent than first reported. The practical takeaway that has held up: decision quality is not constant across a day, and the order in which you make decisions matters.

A 2014 study in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (Vohs et al.) found that decision-making itself — independent of active self-control — depleted the same regulatory resource, and that people who had already made many trivial choices persisted less on subsequent tasks and made more impulsive shopping decisions.

MORNING PROTOCOL

- ☐ Make your highest-stakes decision of the day before 11am, while decision capacity is at its daily peak.
- ☐ Decide your meals for the day the night before, or default to a fixed rotation — remove food choice from the morning entirely.
- ☐ Lay out clothing the night before, or reduce wardrobe to a small rotation of pre-approved combinations.
- ☐ Batch small administrative decisions (replies, approvals, scheduling) into one fixed block instead of scattering them across the day.

Daily Structure & Triage

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STRUCTURAL FIXES

- ☐ Pre-commit to recurring decisions with a standing rule ("I train at 7am", "I don't check email before 9am") so the choice is made once, not daily.
- ☐ Use a fixed decision hierarchy: only escalate a choice to careful deliberation if it is expensive, hard to reverse, or high-stakes. Default everything else to "good enough."
- ☐ Schedule your most consequential meetings and choices in the first half of the day; push low-stakes admin to the afternoon decision trough.
- ☐ Take a genuine break — food, movement, or rest — between long blocks of consequential decisions. The parole-board data shows restoration was real and fast, not gradual.
- ☐ Reduce the number of options actively considered per decision. Research on choice overload (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) found more options can reduce both satisfaction and follow-through, not just decision speed.

EVENING TRIAGE

Spend five minutes each evening identifying tomorrow's one or two decisions that actually require full deliberation. Everything else defaults to routine, a pre-set rule, or someone else's recommendation. The goal isn't fewer decisions in your life — it's spending your limited daily capacity for effortful choice on the ones that are actually worth it.