Decision Fatigue – It's a Real Thing!

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Just this weekend, after a week of making decisions for clients, my business, our upcoming graduation open house, a summer vacation, and a national project, I was working in my office on Saturday much later than usual. My husband asked me a simple question, something like if I wanted a salad or not with dinner. He immediately read my face and knew that I couldn't possibly answer that question and said, "Never mind. I'll decide." I'm curious, do you get to that point too? When even the simplest of decisions seems impossible to make? If you do, be comforted to know that you're not alone. There's even a term for it:

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Decision Fatigue

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In fact, just Google that phrase and you'll find countless articles as well as a Wikipedia entry explaining the term. One very interesting article was published in the New York Times in 2011. It shared a study on prisoners facing a parole board and how the time of day a case was heard appeared to have a direct correlation as to whether or not the prisoner was granted an early release. The time appeared to be a greater factor than other conditions such as ethnicity or the crime committed. The earlier in the day that the case was heard, the greater the probability of an early release. Quite simply, the judge was worn down by the end of the day and erred on the side of caution with the remaining cases. Here's a brief excerpt:

No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can't make decision after decision without paying a biological price. It's different from ordinary physical fatigue — you're not consciously aware of being tired — but you're low on mental energy. The more choices you make throughout the day, the harder each one becomes for your brain, and eventually it looks for shortcuts, usually in either of two very different ways. One shortcut is to become reckless: to act impulsively … The other shortcut is the ultimate energy saver: do nothing. (Tierney)

So, do we just acknowledge this and live with it? Or is there a better way? ☺ Here are a few easy-to-implement solutions to reduce daily decision fatigue that work for me:

1. **Try to make the most important decisions early in the day.** Don't use up your mental energy on the trivial. Schedule significant matters early in the day. Then use the rest of the day for staff meetings, general tasks, email, etc.

2. **Try to reduce the amount of decisions you make every day.** Steve Jobs is a great example. There was a reason you always saw him in the same outfit. He eliminated a decision every morning because he was saving his mental energy for the big decisions he would be making throughout the day. (Harper)

3. **Take mental rests throughout the day.** After spending time on something significant, get up and take a walk or do a few yoga poses. Practice deep breathing or meditation to reset your mind. Allow yourself some transition time before the next item. You'll actually accomplish more and will work faster by building in some mental breaks.

4. **And when absolutely necessary, let your spouse decide what you'll eat for dinner.**

Sources:

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