

# How to Manage Cognitive Depletion and Make Better Decisions During Stressful Times

From Dr. Stan Harris: Most of us are experiencing increased stress and anxiety as we face the myriad challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our daily lives. While we used to be able to go through our day-to-day routine on autopilot, now it seems *everything*, the big and the small, requires a new *decision*. How can I effectively do my job and home school the kids? Should I buy or sell? What will I do if I lose my job? Did I wash my hands? Long enough? Am I far enough away? It seems never-ending and is mentally and physically exhausting.

Psychologists refer to this problem as “*cognitive depletion*.” Roy Baumeister of the University of Queensland developed Cognitive (Ego) Depletion Theory, which suggests we all have a limited store of mental resources and cognitive energy to devote to decision making and self-control. All of these decisions you are having to make deplete your store of resources and energy and cause decision fatigue. That’s why you find it harder to generate the willpower needed to concentrate and focus, stay on the diet, only have one drink, and effectively make the next decision. **Decision fatigue** makes good decision making more difficult and leads to further depletion.

What can we do to replenish our mental resources or at least slow their depletion? Here are five tips:

First, **start to build healthy habits and routines based on initial good decisions**. The more you practice effective hand washing, the less mental energy you have to spend deciding to do it and following through; it becomes a habit. If you take the walk every day at around the same time, you have to devote less energy deciding to do it and it becomes a routine.

Second, **avoid temptations at the end of trying days** when your resources are depleted and your willpower low. This is not the time to shop online or eat with no predetermined limits or boundaries in mind.

Third, **avoid consuming distressing news all day** as it promotes constant rumination about decisions that need to be made. The news also makes us feel bad and negative emotions further sap your energy. Stay informed but don’t swim in negative information or you will find yourself feeling depressed, paralyzed and overwhelmed.

Fourth, **focus on making good decisions rather than optimal decisions**. We can easily spend a lot of our mental resources refining a good decision and leave ourselves depleted when we face the next problem. Forgive yourself for not always being perfect.

Fifth, **find a way to give yourself a break from decision making**. Look for activities that boost your positive mood such as time in nature or watching a show you enjoy. Work to get a good night’s sleep. Call those you love and share in a spirit of gratitude. Positive, self-affirming time away from decision making rebuilds your mental capacity and restores your energy and is one of the best gifts you can give yourself during these trying times.

*Stan Harris is Luck Professor and Associate Dean for Graduate and International Programs at the Harbert College of Business.*

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