

OVERCOMING OVERWHELM

Practical Strategies for Beating
Decision Fatigue



BOB WENDOVER

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*Practical Strategies for
Beating Decision Fatigue*

Robert W. Wendover

Articulate Publications

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

*To all those who have shared their time,
strategies and insights over the past 35 years
to make this book possible.*

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INTRODUCTION

A while back, I landed in London at Heathrow Airport. I would be in the UK for about 10 days and needed cash. I walked over to the closest ATM and inserted my card. I typed in 3933 and the card was declined. I thought, “That’s strange.” I pulled the card out and put it back in and retyped 3933. It was declined a second time. Now I was getting concerned.

I inserted it in a third time and carefully punched in 3-9-3-3. This time, a message came up on the screen that read, “Try that again and we’re going to confiscate your card.” Now I was panicked. I sat down on a nearby bench and thought, “What could be wrong? There’s enough money in the account. I do this all the time.”

Then my emotions took over. “It’s an early Saturday morning. The banks are closed. I have no cash. I’m in Europe and I’ll be here for ten days! What will I do??” Then it dawned on me. I got up, walked back to the machine and inserted the card. I typed in 3-3-9-3 and up came the welcome screen. I withdrew £200 and moved on with my day.

Chances are, you’ve had this experience, or something like it. These are signs of decision fatigue. Other examples abound:

- Have you called someone and then forgotten why you called by the time she picked up?

- Have you stared at a Zoom screen trying to remember the name of someone with whom you interact regularly?
- Have you been caught zoning out in a meeting that you've been running?
- Have you applied hairspray to your underarms or deodorant to your hair?
- Have you forgotten your kids' names while introducing them to a friend?

These are all symptoms of decision fatigue and, unfortunately, we're dealing with more and more of them every day. Today's world has become a never-ending onslaught of opt-ins, opt-outs, pop-ups, updates, upgrades, surveys, social media requests, Tweets, robo-calls, mandatory password changes, spam e-mails, and lots of other nuisance decisions that consume our time, energy, and attention. And that's just digital technology.

There's also the demand to do more with less. The staff of ten has become the staff of eight. The team of six has become the team of five. The assistant who used to report to one person now reports to three. Everybody answers their own phone, clears their own e-mail, types their own reports, and plans their own travel. Meetings are held virtually with little, if any, time for the small talk that allowed co-workers to develop relationships.

Finally, there's the impact of instant access. Whether you're in Boston or Bora Bora, the boss expects you to pick up the phone. Most of those in professional positions regularly check their e-mail

on vacation to stay in the loop and avoid the 1000 messages upon return. Or maybe they're afraid their job will be reassigned, reconfigured, or simply eliminated while they're enjoying margaritas with friends.

No one is immune from these elements, but some people have figured out how to manage the distractions, demands, and pressures that overwhelm most of those around them. That's what *Overcoming Overwhelm* is all about.

These individuals do not differ from the rest of us. They work in the same kinds of offices. They perform the same kinds of jobs. They have the same kinds of education and training. While a few are senior leaders, most serve in positions that are a part of their organization's everyday functions. You know some of them.

Yet for making decisions, they always seem well prepared and confident, even when an issue has been sprung on them at the last minute. Others look to them for guidance because of their quiet confidence and sense of organization. Perhaps you've wondered, "How do they do it?"

Over the past 30 years, I have had the privilege of interviewing more than 3000 of these leaders and managers in all parts of our marketplace. I've spent time with government officials, business owners and corporate executives. What I have discovered is that most of these individuals share certain habits and strategies that enable them to navigate the endless decisions which inundate the rest of us. I have culled all these insights into a collection of strategies and tactics to eradicate the daily fatigue you experience every day.

In this book, I identify the sources of decision fatigue, the symptoms of decision fatigue and the solutions to decision fatigue.

SOURCES – SYMPTOMS – SOLUTIONS

In the coming pages, you'll learn:

- How time chunking saves one senior executive hours per week and compels her staff to up their “decision game.” (page 93)
- How don't do lists trump to-do lists and how the best decision-makers implement them. (page 62)
- Three proven phrases that shorten meetings. (page 79)
- How to pro-actively manage people who are demanding and difficult. (page 84)
- The simple question to ask before making any decision of consequence. (page 63)
- AND A WHOLE MORE!

I've designed this book to be a short, accessible read. Who has time to plod through a couple hundred pages? You want ideas now. However, we will drill down a bit at the beginning on the “why” of decision fatigue. Knowing the why always helps in applying the “how.”

As you do so, go to www.commonsenseenterprises.net and read my blog posts. Sign up for my year-long series of one-minute video tips. Finally participate and comment. We're all in this overwhelming world together. So, let me hear from you!

LET'S GET STARTED!

How Much Does Decision Fatigue Impact You?

*Answer the 15 questions below by circling one of the four options. Then tally up your score at the bottom. Always = 1 pt Often = 2 pts
Sometimes = 3 pts Rarely = 4 pts*

Get an interpretation of your results on the next page.

Do you feel overwhelmed when trying to select a movie on Netflix?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you tire of making everyday decisions?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you experience the fear of missing out when you don't have access to social media?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Are you more hesitant to make decisions of consequence than you were a few years ago?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you experience times in the day when curling up for a nap sounds like a good idea?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you let salespeople talk you into something you don't need?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you give in when you shouldn't because you're tired of thinking?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you stall on decisions because you're unsure of the outcome?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you feel like you're busy but not effective?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you catch yourself staring at the screen, not being able to spell common words?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you call people and not remember why when they pick up?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you draw a complete blank on colleagues' names when you see them?

Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
--------	-------	-----------	--------

Do you get caught zoning out in a meeting YOU are running?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you walk into the grocery store and not remember what you went in for?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you spray your hair with deodorant or apply hairspray to your underarms by accident?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

Do you forget your kids' names in front of friends and neighbors?

Always Often Sometimes Rarely

51 – 60 Congratulations. Compared to pretty much everyone, you appear to sail through life without being affected by decision fatigue. Everything indicates you are on top of your game every waking moment of the day. The best decision-makers in the world could take lessons from you. Rather than reading it, please give this book to someone who can really use it.

45 – 59 For the most part, decision fatigue does not play a role in your life. There are times, however, when you succumb to the distractions that seem to surround us all the time.

By picking this book, you're probably looking for ways to sharpen the edge of your energy and focus. You've come to the right place. Understand that the three major attributes associated with these strategies are control over your impulses, making fewer decisions and managing your physical energy. Embracing the psychology behind all this is the key to success. So, begin with chapter one and learn how the best thinkers approach this challenge that dogs us all if we let it.

- 30 – 44 Okay, decision fatigue plays a role in your life, but you're working to overcome it. That's a good start. A lot of your problem probably centers on impulse control. That jelly donut for breakfast every morning will not launch you into the day. Checking social media every 15 minutes may keep you current with friends but distract you from performing at a level that will get you ahead. The strategies in this book will help you develop the energy and focus to anticipate your decision fatigue and beat it back with a stick.
- 15 – 29 Hmmm. Decision fatigue appears to have you by the tail. Rather than being proactive, you react to every distraction, demand and disruption. You've told yourself that's life. But you know this is not true. You're too concerned about what other people think. In addition, you just hate adjusting your lifestyle. That would be so awkward and uncomfortable. But you can't keep living this way. The ideas in this book will help. Don't, however, skip right

to the strategies. Start with chapter one. Understanding your own psychology is half the battle.

- 1 – 14 Let's face it, you're probably too far gone for this book to help. I'd suggest you get back in bed with a quart of rocky road ice cream and your favorite alcoholic beverage. Pull up the covers and immerse yourself in binge television or YouTube. *I'm only kidding!* There's hope for everyone when dealing with decision fatigue. We all face it occasionally. The best way to start is by reading this book and taking little steps. Trying to change too many habits all at once will have you retreating to the recliner. Instead, find a buddy and ask that person to hold you accountable. That's how the best decision-makers do it.

CHAPTER ONE

DECISION FATIGUE AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE

Before you go any further, take a couple of minutes and complete the assessment on the previous pages. Don't study it too much. Just rate yourself on each statement. We'll talk more about these issues as we proceed through the book.

So . . . what is decision fatigue? The term was coined by a social scientist named Roy Baumeister in 2001. When he coined the term, Baumeister probably had little idea of the crazy-busy world that would erupt with the advent of digital technology, globalization and other factors.

In simple terms, ***decision fatigue*** is when you make bad choices because your brain is overloaded due to the overwhelming demands of modern life. We've all been there. We settle for things we shouldn't. We give into silly temptations. We feel like we're pushing through

tasks with mediocrity. We become impatient with the people around us for no real reason. In general, we get fed up with work, family, politics and pretty much anything else where we have to think.

We also become susceptible to pushy salespeople, endless upsells, and the appeals from everyone who's got something to support. When this happens, we become fearful of making mistakes, spending money, damaging relationships with people, or making choices we'll regret. In some cases, we just shut down. We stop making decisions, any decision. If we do make decisions, even the little ones seem to take so much more effort. Sometimes, we want to hunker down, maybe even curl up in a ball under the desk. (Just kidding ...sort of.)

Decision fatigue does not announce itself. There are no flashing lights or sirens. It sneaks up on you as you navigate the day. It can arise after a morning of making lots of decisions. We might go into a meeting full of energy and emerge exhausted because of disagreements. We might feel frazzled just looking at our to-do list. All of this becomes cumulative. It eats away at our emotional and physical energy. Sometimes, we just want to climb back in bed.

You can experience decision fatigue throughout the day or week. That's what can make it so unpredictably maddening. Just when we've got to make the big decision of the day, we feel the energy drain from our being. Just when we need to have a difficult conversation, the fog rolls in and slows down our thinking. By the time we go shopping for groceries, we end up staring at the shelves, unable to make quick choices. Am I over-playing this?

A few years ago, we never felt as overwhelmed as we do now. Sure, we all had moments when we just got tired of thinking. It might have been after a stressful meeting. Or maybe the kids had something traumatic happen and you helped them think their way through it. Perhaps it was a particularly busy time at work. But it didn't seem to go on day after day after day. You were able to catch your breath. You were able to get away. You didn't take work home with you. You could crash in front of the TV and let the world do its thing without you. You could disengage for a while and not worry that you were missing out. How the environment has changed!

A lot of this is because we are being compelled to make unnecessary choices such as digital distractions, spam, and robocalls. Rather spending energy focused on the significant decisions, these nuisances chip away at our reserves bit by bit.

Decision fatigue affects different people in different ways. If you pay attention, however, you'll begin to see patterns in how it affects you. Here's an example:

Over time, I have come to recognize that I focus best early in the morning. This is when I write books and articles and think through the complexities with which I sometimes deal. I feel invigorated when I sit down to work on projects right after breakfast. But by 11 AM, I am generally spent. I can feel my creativity and energy waning. I've gotten tired of thinking. So, I move on to other projects that are less mentally taxing. I also know that later in the day, say from 3-6 PM, I will generally feel another boost of energy. I use this time for tasks that are more doing- than thinking-

oriented. That means I can power through e-mails, organize tasks and complete the other items that come with running a business. This process is not totally predictable, but recognizing these general routines help me plan my days for the most efficiency.

My colleague, Julie is quite opposite from me in this regard. We've known each other for a long time. But I've learned that connecting with her before nine in the morning is probably not going to happen. She takes her time getting up. She waters the flowers, enjoys a nice breakfast, walks the dog and does some inspirational reading. Then she commences her day.

That's not to say she's incapable of making decisions early in the morning. If the meeting begins at 8 AM, she'll be there and well prepared. But she really comes alive in the afternoon and the evening. Whereas I write books, like this one, early in the morning, she cranks out hers after 10 PM. It's not unusual for her to send me emails after midnight. I read them the next morning. If I call her in the evening, she greets me with the same enthusiasm that I would greet her if she called me early in the morning.

Stop reading for a minute and consider these two examples. Which one better describes you? Maybe you're someplace in the middle. Regardless, the key is to recognize the patterns in your energy and concentration. That way, you can leverage them to your advantage. Your ability to leverage these patterns will improve your daily decision making. That's because you'll have a better idea when your ability to focus will be at its peak.

Now, you may be thinking, “This all makes sense. But you don’t know my work environment or my boss. She’s a morning person and I’m not. She comes at us with big decisions to make before I’ve finished my first cup of coffee.”

Or you might say, “I just don’t get the time to think. In my office, everyone is expected to make instantaneous decisions. If I stop to consider issues, people wonder what’s wrong with me.”

Or you might laugh and say, “Of course you can do this. You work for yourself. You have total control. The rest of us are at the mercy of the bosses we report to!” (I won’t try to defend this last one, other than to say that most self-employed people I know joke that they work half-time – 12 hours a day.)

We also have to acknowledge how the workplace has changed. Over the past twenty years, much of the traditional 8 AM – 5 PM routine has given way to flexible hours, allowing us to enjoy more life balance, if we take it. The focus on tasks has given way to more of a focus on outcomes. Much of daily communication, both at work and elsewhere, is now dominated by digital technology. In some ways, we have more freedom in the way we live, work and make decisions.

But in other ways, we feel more limited. We may have more flexibility in our official work hours, but the boss still expects us to respond to messages almost immediately. After all, that’s what smartphones are for. Right? Communication has become more transactional. For many everyday tasks, this is perfectly acceptable and even welcome. But how many times have you thought, “Should

we try to resolve this over 20 text messages or should I just make a call?”

Of course, this evolution has also brought forth the era of the expectation of never-ending access. If your boss has a quick question, chances are he can text you while you're on vacation. This, in turn, is having an incalculable impact on employee stress.

So what impact is this having on us? Go back and take a look at the 15 questions you answered at the beginning of this chapter. What insights did you take away?

In spite of all the obstacles we face in today's crazy-busy, decision-demanding world, it is possible to re-think, re-frame, and re-order your life to leverage your time and energy to accomplish your goals. This doesn't happen overnight. It is a journey of trial and error, discovering what works and what doesn't work. Over time, you will develop a rhythm and knowledge, enabling you to manage the people and environment around you – even your bosses. I'm going to share the strategies and tactics to do so in the second half of this book. But first, we need to take a short look at the brain. After all, that's where all decisions begin.

Chapter Take-Aways

- Decision fatigue is when you start making bad decisions because your brain is overloaded by all the distractions in today's overwhelming world
- When we suffer from decision fatigue, we become more susceptible to advertising messages, pushy salespeople and other forms of influence.

- We can experience decision fatigue off and on throughout the day, depending on our activities and blood glucose levels.
- Paying attention to the energy rhythms you experience will enable you to leverage your higher energy times for decisions that require the most focus.
- As work hours and environments have become more flexible, we can better manage how we make decisions. At the same time, we are more likely to be working more waking hours, which will have an impact on energy and focus. The best decision-makers are smart and assertive about managing this.

CHAPTER TWO

YOUR BRAIN ON DECISION FATIGUE

Let's spend a few minutes exploring how the brain is affected by today's overwhelming world. You might be asking, "Why didn't decision fatigue exist in the past?" Actually, it's always been a part of the equation. To put it simply, decision fatigue is the result of your brain running out of the blood glucose (sugar energy) it needs to maintain normal function.

Blood glucose is one of the essential elements in brain function. As you eat, blood glucose is produced as your body breaks down the carbohydrates contained in foods like fruit, bread and potatoes. This glucose is released by the intestines into the rest of the body. The liver acts as a reservoir for this glucose and helps to keep it circulating to areas where it is needed. Once it enters your bloodstream, insulin enables it to get to your cells.

Insulin is a hormone, produced by the pancreas. It regulates the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood and is required for your body to function normally. Your body keeps the glucose levels in your blood consistent. Beta cells in your pancreas monitor your blood sugar level. When your blood glucose increases after you eat, the beta cells release insulin into your bloodstream. Insulin unlocks muscle, fat, and liver cells so the glucose your body produces can get inside of them.

Most cells in our body use glucose for energy. But it's the main source of fuel for our brain. The brain's nerve cells and chemical messengers need it to help them process information. Without it, our brain wouldn't be able to function. After your body has used the energy it needs, the leftover glucose is stored in the liver and muscles in little bundles called glycogen.

When you haven't eaten for a few hours, the level of blood glucose drops. Your pancreas stops churning out insulin. Alpha cells in the pancreas produce a different hormone called glucagon. It signals the liver to break down stored glycogen and turn it back into glucose. That travels to your bloodstream to replenish your supply until you're able to eat again. Your liver can also make its own glucose using a combination of waste products, amino acids, and fats.

So why explain all this? Because the brain depends on this glucose to function. When the level of glucose drops, we lose our sense of concentration until it is replenished. In today's crazy-busy world, this is happening at a more rapid pace because we are making many more decisions than we used to.

Let's look at a couple of examples. Suppose you travel by air for a vacation. Before digital technology, you would call or visit a travel agent. That person would ask you the essentials about the date, time, destination. He or she would then reply to you with the reservation, having dealt with the airline, rental car company and hotel. You now face so many more choices. You might visit the individual airline, auto rental and hotel websites. But more likely, you'll use a search engine to find one of the more than one hundred travel aggregator sites promising the absolutely lowest prices, best schedules, and special add-ons, guaranteed.

Once you select an aggregator, you have to learn how to navigate the site. You fill out the fields, click submit and are confronted with hundreds of flight pairs and airfares. It's up to you to page through these listings to find the right combination for your needs and budget. As you are doing so, messages keep popping up, enticing you to other sites and special deals. Ignoring all these distractions, requires endless micro-decisions that consume the glucose your brain needs to function. If you change even one element or simply refresh the search result, that fantastic airfare and schedule you like may have vanished and you have to start over again. Then all the glucose energy you spent finding the best airfare and pairing has been wasted.

Once you've selected the flights, you need to submit your name, address, phone number, frequent flier number, gender, and credit card information, along with seat selection, number of checked bags, whether you want to purchase additional frequent flier miles, and whether you want flight insurance. Are you sure you don't

want flight insurance? What once took five to ten minutes on the phone now takes 20-30 minutes, and you're still not sure you got the best deal.

I'm not arguing that digital technology is the bane of our existence. I'm just arguing it is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it provides access and convenience. It allows us to automate tasks that used to be done manually. On the other hand, this technology allows those marketing to us to send endless e-mails, pop-up messages, surveys, and other distractions that capture our attention, no matter how irrelevant they are.

When we use social media, we allow those platforms to manipulate our use in ways that favor what the business wants us to do. A good example of this is the never-ending web page that entices us to scroll forever. Another example is that once you've responded to someone's post, you have no choice but to deal an email every time someone else responds to the same post. I love sending birthday wishes to friends, for instance. But I do not need to know how many other people did so. Yet, there is no way to avoid these messages. This not only wastes time, it consumes blood glucose that could be used for other decisions and endeavors.

Finally, digital technology has enabled organizations, governments and otherwise, to provide us with access, purchase products, and a wide variety of other tasks that used to require a phone call or visit. For them, it reduces the cost of staffing and facilities. But it compels us to navigate a seemingly endless parade of screens to make a purchase, renew a license, register for an event, and so much else. Each time we are confronted with a new screen,

we are compelled to make one or more decisions, large and small. Each decision consumes a bit of the glucose the brain needs to function. Is it any wonder, now, that we feel tired after simply renewing a driver's license? One license, but 27 screens, resulting in 27 decisions. We are also faced many times with poorly designed websites and processes that make the task, and the decision process, even more frustrating.

Let's take another example. Suppose you work on a team of six, responding to inbound customer service calls. In the typical hour, you handle 15 calls. But recently the company's software has been upgraded. You've learned the new system and it does make some tasks more efficient. However, two of your team members have left and not been replaced. So now you're effectively a team of four.

While your expectation of 15 calls per hour has not gone up, customers are now waiting longer to talk to you and your colleagues. Because of this, they are more impatient when they do get through. You feel pressure to make faster decisions and increase your efficiency. You worry this rush to complete each call is having a negative impact on the customers' experience and may even result in more inbound calls from people who did not get their issue or question completely resolved the first time.

While you may not work as a customer service representative, you probably can identify with this dilemma and relate it to what you do. We all seem to do more with less these days. The blood glucose our brains consume in dealing with these pressures and thoughts contribute to the decision fatigue we feel when trying to concentrate on the decisions that really require focus.

Now as much as I've spent the past few minutes discussing the impact of a lack of blood glucose, too much of it can also be harmful. That's why that venti, triple-shot, upside-down, caramel macchiato every morning is not good for you (or your bank account). Look around your workplace. Chances are, you won't see the most productive people bringing one of those to work every day. They've discovered that all that caffeine and sugar will jazz you for a couple of hours and then put you to sleep for the rest of the morning. The same thing is true with that super burger with cheese sauce you love for lunch. It sure does taste good, but also puts your lights out in the middle of the two o'clock meeting. I'm not saying that fancy coffees and delicious lunches are off-limits. Just recognize the impact they will have on your metabolism and ability to make focused decisions.

So, what are the take-aways from this chapter?

- Decision fatigue has always been around. But we're facing more of it because we're forced to make hundreds of "micro-decisions" as a part of each day. This saps the brain energy we have that could be used to concentrate on more significant decisions.
- Blood glucose is the fuel that powers our brain. It is produced by the digestive system and is regulated by insulin produced by the pancreas. When glucose levels drop, our ability to focus is impaired until we eat some food and the glucose level is restored.

- As the body uses up glucose, it looks for a quick way to replenish the fuel, leading to a craving for sugar. When you're tired of making decisions, eat a couple of cookies. But remember, this is just a temporary solution.
- Digital technology is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, tremendous convenience enables us to work more efficiently. On the other hand, endless distractions keep us from making the best daily decisions we can.
- There is no way to eliminate the impact of making so many more decisions each day. Your goal, instead, should be to effectively manage the number of daily decisions you are compelled to make. This will help you conserve the glucose your body produces for issues of meaningful focus and concentration.
- Your brain does not stop working when your glucose level is low. But it does stop performing more complex tasks and does more simple tasks. That's why making complicated or expensive decisions when your glucose is low is not a good idea. Your brain also responds more strongly to immediate rewards and pays less attention to long-term prospects.

CHAPTER THREE

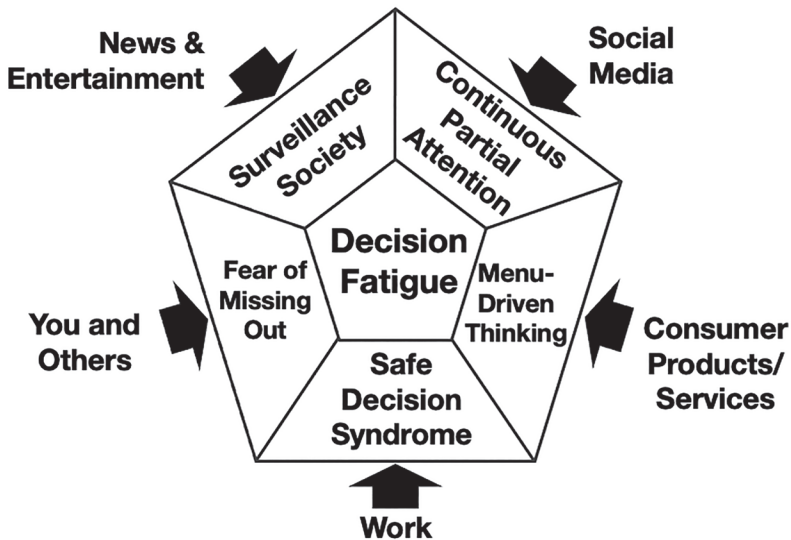
THE FIVE SOURCES OF DECISION FATIGUE

Imagine a morning where you wake up from a restful night's sleep. The birds are singing. The sun is shining. Perhaps you smell coffee brewing. You don't know what time it is, but you don't care. You have purposefully removed all signs of time from your bedroom. You get dressed, remembering you have no commitments scheduled for today. You're tempted to check your email, but then discard the idea for sitting on the deck while the morning dawns. You feel a sense of peace, knowing there is nothing so pressing it cannot be postponed until you want to do it. Ahhhhh . . .

Wouldn't all this be nice. Unfortunately, it is not reality, even on your days off. As we get up each morning, most of us are inundated by endless media, messages and distractions that typically begin with the smartphone beside our bed. How convenient it was for smartphone manufacturers to include everything you will ever need in a device that fits in your pocket. Their ulterior motive was to keep this device within reach 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The compulsion we feel to pick up our smart phone first thing is where decision fatigue begins every morning. Some people even feel physically uneasy if their iPhone or Android is not right by their side. Consider the number of times you look at your device within the first hour. You know how it goes – Check the time. Glance at your texts. Pick it up when it chirps and discover your boss backed the meeting up an hour. Check the weather and a pop-up tells you about the latest trash-talking politicians. And so it goes.

By the time you're ready for work or school, you've made dozens of decisions about which emails to delete and which to keep, whether you need to respond to the panicked text from a co-worker and if you should stop by the store for the special that will only last until 4 PM. Every choice requires a decision. And each decision consumes a certain amount of the blood glucose with which you started the day.



Decision fatigue, of course, is about more than just digital technology. We're going to spend this chapter reviewing the sources of decision fatigue. We'll spend the next exploring the symptoms. These sources can be divided into five categories:

The first is work. This includes all the decisions we make as we navigate our way through the day. It is the emails, the popups during online browsing, the opt-ins and opt-outs, the software updates, the pins, the passwords and so on.

Then there the decisions that normally populate your job. If you're working on the front line, you may be making hundreds of instantaneous choices as you work with customers, deal with vendors, process forms, or ship products. If you're in a management role, the number of decisions will be fewer, but the gravity of each one more significant.

Our communication has become more transactional. Rather than phoning and chatting, we text, email and instant message. Instead of a two-minute conversation to resolve an issue, we send electronic messages back and forth, sometimes for a couple of hours. These interactions involve hundreds of idiosyncratic decisions throughout the day. Is it any wonder we feel tired even if we don't physically exert ourselves?

Second, there are consumer products and services. Have you ever stood in the toothpaste aisle wondering about the difference between extra white, super white, and optic white? Have you stood in the paint aisle and wondered why we need 240 shades of white? Usually we are not looking for the best choice, but discarding all

the ones that aren't. As a result, we stand there thinking, "No, that's not it, no, that's not it, no, that's not it." Why? Because our brains are trained to eliminate risk. Every time we say, "No, that's not it," we are decreasing risk through a process of elimination. Each one of these eliminations is a micro-decision that consumes a bit of blood glucose. And so you wonder why you're tired of thinking after spending 15 minutes choosing between shades of white.

The third source is social media. Social media is its own category. It has been for the past 10 years because people are so immersed in it. Whether it's Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok or LinkedIn, we seem to feel an obligation to keep up on every little development in others' lives whether they're relevant or not. We can feel overwhelmed by all the comments and updates that are part of the challenge. We need to remember that social media companies are not in the business to help us. They're in the business to make money. That's just the fact of life. Much as the media is not in the business to inform us, they are in the business to make money.

That's the reason why Facebook has a never-ending page, for instance. You can scroll and scroll and scroll and scroll and finally get to a point where it becomes addictive. You might have planned to check it for 30 seconds. But you checked it for 30 minutes because you knew there was always one more "important" item that might be worth seeing. If you switch away from that page, you will never get the same page a second time. This means when you see something on that page, you'll think, "Wow, I want to hang onto that. If I switch away from the page, I may not be able to find

it when I go back.” As a result, you feel stressed and frustrated. This consumes and depletes your blood glucose levels.

Fourth, there is news and entertainment. These used to be two separate categories. But over the past two decades, they have become one. It’s hard to tell the difference between the two. You can be watching a “news” program, for example, and it will bounce from sports to a crime report, to a movie review and back again. I’ve counted as many as 28 separate stories being covered in a space of 30 minutes. Most stories are now 30-45 seconds in length. Add in the advertisements, which are now 10 and 20 seconds apiece, and you can become overwhelmed just sitting there.

Fifth, there are you and others. This the communication between family, friends and co-workers. Much of this is now dominated by digital transactions such as texts, emails, tweets, and instant messaging. The nature of communication has changed. If we want the kids to come to dinner, we text them in their bedrooms. If we want pizza for lunch, we order it online. If we need help with our cable service, we talk to a digital assistant.

In the past, we might pick up the phone and have a two-minute conversation to solve a problem. Now we email. Two hours later, that person responds. Why? Because they clear their emails at particular times or were busy with something. It might take us a full day to go back and forth over an issue that could have been resolved in a short chat. We end up with incomplete conversations, all being held in the back of our minds. These incompletes drain our energy since we have to maintain an active memory of them until they are resolved.

Here's an example. A few years ago, I spoke with a woman who runs an admissions office at a community college. One thing that drives her and her colleagues nuts are prospective students who send emails asking questions about credits, applications, tuition and other admissions policies. She and her staff will respond, typically with clarifying questions to make sure they are providing the correct information. Often, however, these prospective students will not respond promptly. It might be several hours or even several days before she hears from them again. Sometimes, the prospect sends the response in a new email, lacking the history of what was being discussed.

She and her team have to dig back through the past week's correspondence to find out who this was and the nature of their inquiry. During certain times of the year, these might number 100 or more in a week. The decisions necessary to manage this process drains the energy of everyone on the staff because most of it is non-productive work.

These five sources combine daily to overwhelm our decision-making processes. There's no way we can avoid them completely. But we can mitigate their impact on our lives. And that brings up the next consideration. What impact do these sources have on our thinking and decision-making? We'll address that in the next chapter.

So, what are the take-aways from this chapter?

- The sources of decision fatigue can be divided into five categories:
 - o Work
 - o Consumer products and services
 - o Social media
 - o News and entertainment
 - o You and others
- Our communication has become more transactional.
- Often, we are presented with too many choices. We are not looking for the best choice, but discarding all the ones that aren't. Every time we say, "No, that's not it," we are expending a bit of the sugar energy that powers us through the day.
- Today's asynchronous communication, such as email, texting, and other messaging software taxes our brains because we are living in a world of incomplete transactions. These incomplete transactions are carried in the background of thinking until resolved, creating, often, a low-level uneasiness.
- Social media applications become addictive with use. We feel stressed when we cannot reach the bottom of a page, watch the remainder of a video, or see the complete information without signing in or providing personal information.

- News and entertainment have been blended into a broadcast or streaming feed that provides short stories without context. This leads to mistaken assumptions, shallow thinking and a sense of disappointment and frustration. The result is a general distrust in news and entertainment media.
- The nature of human communication has increasingly migrated to digital platforms, which limits the nuances of how people express themselves. This has resulted in an increase in the incidence of miscommunication and the resulting anger, frustration and other emotions. This ability to remain impersonal has also fostered a degradation of civil discourse. All of this requires more energy and focus to navigate, contributing to decision fatigue among many.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIVE SYMPTOMS OF DECISION FATIGUE

You began the day with lots of energy, ready to focus on the tasks at hand. You were in a good mood and cheerfully greeting the people around you. You had a couple of meetings lined up for the morning, along with a virtual conference in the afternoon. Then you were planning to head home for a nice dinner and connect with a couple of friends.

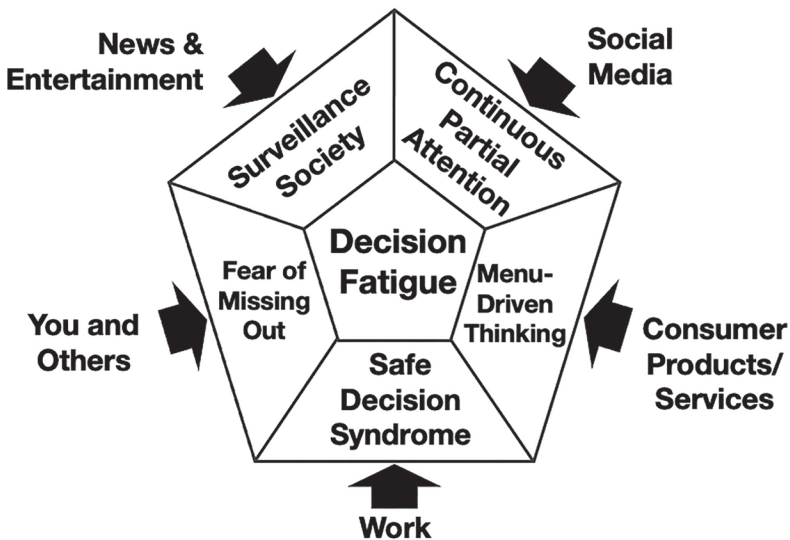
But as the morning progressed, you felt a mental haze forming after you had answered 18 emails, checked in with those on your team and talked with a vendor about her proposal. About 15 minutes into the 10 AM meeting, someone nudged you because they thought you were nodding off. A cup of coffee and half a muffin at the break cleared the haze.

After lunch, you regained your focus and answered more emails, resolved a dispute about billing and sat in your boss's office

while he went on about one of your co-workers. You hit the wall again during the virtual conference and drove home feeling like you had accomplished nothing.

Does this sound familiar? You're not alone. Millions of people experience this same roller-coaster every day. The reason? Decision fatigue. The number of decisions we make has exploded over the past few years. So has the pace. We can go from feeling energized to half asleep and back again within just a few minutes. This is influenced by what we eat, with whom we communicate, and the tasks we perform.

This roller-coaster presents itself through a variety of symptoms. When we can identify these symptoms, we stand a much better chance of understanding how to manage them.



We can begin with **continuous partial attention**. This term was coined by Linda Stone, a tech writer and consultant. She defines it as a “modern adaptive behavior of continuously dividing one’s attention.” We try to stay connected all the time in different modalities, so we miss nothing. Imagine a person who navigates through the day constantly checking social media and clearing email, all while participating in meetings, working on tasks and staying up with the office vibe. Does that describe you, at least sometimes?

Continuous partial attention is not necessarily dysfunctional. But it can overload your brain, create stress, and diffuse the focus necessary to make the best decisions. This condition differs from multi-tasking. We’ll talk about that in Chapter Seven.

Because of all this, your attention is never totally focused on one thing. Even if you attempt to concentrate on one task, there may be several distractions in the environment. Perhaps there’s music. Maybe the chirp of a smartphone. Perhaps there are constant pop-ups on the screen. Maybe the images around what you’re reading change every several seconds to attract attention. Perhaps a steady stream of emails continue to announce themselves in a corner of your screen. You get the idea.

Your brain has trouble managing all of these elements because your short-term memory can only handle a limited number of stimuli at the same time, about five or six, according to research. This includes *all* stimuli, by the way. Elements like the temperature of the room, the amount of light, what people are wearing and the tone of their voices are all part of this equation. In reality, the brain

can only *attend* to one thing at a time. If you are reading an email and your smartphone chirps, for instance, your attention will be diverted, even if you don't actually check to see what it is. Your brain makes a micro-decision, staying focused on the email. But this micro-decision saps a tiny bit of your blood glucose. These distractions build up and when this happens enough, you feel mentally fatigued.

Often, when distracted, your short-term memory flushes everything and it rebuilds itself. Imagine, for instance, that you're conversing with someone. Your phone vibrates in your pocket, and you look down. Maybe you put your hand on your pocket for just a second because you feel it. But as you do so, you lose the focus you had on the person's question or comment. You ask them to repeat what they said. This is all associated with continuous partial attention.

The second symptom is **safe decision syndrome**. Because we are making so many decisions these days, we become afraid of making one or more significant errors. It's not the significant decisions that wear us out. It is the accumulation of micro-decisions on any given day.

In addition, we have become more attuned to how people are treated when mistakes are made. Marketing writer, Seth Godin, has observed that people are not so much afraid of making a mistake these days. They are more afraid of the blame they may receive because of the error committed. Sadly, we've seen ample evidence of this in both social and broadcast media. Pity the poor person, for instance, whose innocent mistake goes viral because it

was caught on video and posted on Facebook. Is it any wonder that most people have become hesitant about what they say and do, even in private conversations and forums?

This apprehension has become a part of the workplace as well. Too many people have seen someone chastised for an error, oversight or mistake in judgment. Those with safe decision syndrome put off decisions they can and should make. They “pass the buck” to a supervisor. They look for other ways to divert responsibility. They spend an extraordinary amount of effort making sure that every decision, regardless of significance, is well documented.

These practices become sand in the gears of functioning organizations. How about yours?

The third symptom is **menu-driven thinking**, or being over-dependent upon all the digital menus we navigate throughout most waking hours. Much of daily life has been taken over by the choices on the screens we confront each day. We clear email, check the news, catch up on social media and search for information on the device in our hands. We use the screen on the check-stand to purchase groceries. We use the screen in our SUV to back up, change the music and adjust the temperature. For many functions, this has been a tremendous advancement. Most tasks we used to perform manually are now automated.

But judgment is not one of them. That’s where the disconnect occurs. You can have all the information you need. You still have to decide based on your judgment and intuition. Any decision of significance involves uncertainty. That can discourage you from

deciding. Bottom line? You can have all the menu options in the world. But you still have to make a decision and live with the consequences.

Menu-driven thinking fosters a dependence on programmed choices rather than creative thinking. This gives you a false sense you can always find the right answer someplace in the menus. But decisions don't have answers. They have outcomes. Over time, this belief can impair the development of your judgment. This creates a sense of helplessness outside of digital environments. You may feel some of your energy drain away as you struggle to solve problems without digital assists.

The fourth symptom is the **fear of missing out** or FOMO. While we first identified this symptom in teenagers, it has certainly spread to the wider population. A significant portion of the population now awakes and goes to sleep with a smartphone in their hands. Are you one of them? Social media use in the workplace ranges from five- to twenty-five percent of the time.

Google, Apple, Facebook, Twitter, and the other companies offering these platforms have worked endlessly to make the use of these sites is addictive. More eyeballs and more clicks mean more revenue. This includes the never-ending scroll, suggestions based on prior use, and that you will never see the same feed a second time if you click away. This promotes a fear you will miss something that a friend or colleague is saying or doing.

Increasingly, friendships and other relationships are developed and maintained on these platforms. But because of the

asynchronous nature of how people communicate there, the natural flow of interaction is both delayed and distorted. In face-to-face or telephone conversations, for instance, misunderstandings are cleared up immediately. Online, a poorly worded message can be misinterpreted and worried about for hours if one person involved doesn't respond promptly. Sadly, most people these days will not pick up the phone and say, "Hey! Let's straighten this out right now." Instead, they may stew for hours only to find out there was nothing to worry about. Fear of missing out can contribute significantly to your decision fatigue, if you allow it.

The fifth symptom is what I call **surveillance society**. The advances in digital technology have enabled corporations and governmental agencies to interact with us in more sophisticated ways. Geo-location software enables map programs to provide us with step-by-step directions to our destinations. When we call to order pizza, the person in the store can see our phone number on her screen. When we purchase something online, we are automatically prompted to buy the extended warranty. If we complete a form, the system auto-populates the remaining fields, if we have provided the information before. The variations seem endless.

But these advances are used in ways that annoy us and add to our decision fatigue as well. The incessant "How are we doing?" surveys are a good example of this. So are robocalls. Then there are the endless software updates that claim to enhance our user experience. In reality, they just force us to install features we'll never use. (Some people call this bloatware.) Once again, the variations seem endless.

These assists are based on what might be called, “behind-the-scenes” technology such as cookies, voice-activation software, electronic eyes, retinal scans, radio-frequency tags and facial recognition. On one side, this technology provides convenience and a sense of security. On the other, we’ve wondered whether our health and financial data are really secure. Besides, who wants our every movement, conversation and keystroke recorded? The end result of all this adds thousands of micro-decisions to our already overwhelming days.

These five symptoms, and variations of them, can dominate our days if we let them. When we let this happen, we lack the focus to make the decisions that really count. Those who manage these sources and symptoms effectively have developed habits of mind to diminish these influences. So, how do you develop good habits of mind? We’ll cover that in Chapter Six. Meanwhile, let’s review the five essentials of beating decision fatigue.

So, what are the take-aways from this chapter?

- The symptoms of decision fatigue can be divided into five categories:
 - o Continuous partial attention
 - o Safe-decision syndrome
 - o Menu-driven thinking
 - o Fear of missing out
 - o Surveillance society

- Continuous partial attention is not necessarily dysfunctional. But it can overload your brain, create stress, and diffuse the focus necessary to make the best decisions.
- The brain's short-term, or working, memory can manage only five to six stimuli at a time for about five seconds. After this, all stimuli are discarded and are replaced by the present stimuli.
- Safe decision syndrome is the fear of making decisions where a definite outcome cannot be predicted. More people are more afraid of blame these days than having to recover from the error.
- Menu-driven thinking is being over-dependent upon digital menus and prompts. This degrades one's ability to think creatively and decisively when a decision needs to be made outside of this environment. For some, menu-driven thinking inhibits the development of nuanced problem-solving skills. This, by itself, can become a source of decision fatigue as the person has to spend extra energy learning these skills.
- Decisions don't have answers. They have outcomes.
- The Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) directly affects our ability to maintain energy and focus because of the emotional demands it places on our attention.
- Our surveillance society includes the expansive use of biometrics such as retinal scans, fingerprint scans and facial recognition. It also includes the interconnected digital profiles being maintained by governments, healthcare organizations, social

media and consumer firms. Concern about these factors can drain energy and focus and impact normal decision-making.

- These five symptoms of decision fatigue can dominate our days if we allow them. When we let this happen, it impacts the focus we need to make the decisions that really count.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIVE ESSENTIALS TO BEATING DECISION FATIGUE

Look around your workplace, volunteer organization or anywhere people gather. If you study those in the group, you'll realize that a few people stand out as the best decision-makers. Even in a family gathering, you've probably noticed that certain aunts, uncles and cousins make better choices than the rest. Everyone looks to Aunt Karen because she exudes confidence when solving problems. They look to Uncle Jack because he can get to the heart of a problem faster than anyone else.

These thinkers share certain attributes. One of these is the ability to leverage energy and focus by managing decision fatigue. In this chapter, we will explore five essential practices that enable them to do so. Usually these practices have been learned from

others. They might have come from a conversation or perhaps an observation. They might have asked the person something like, “You’re such a good decision-maker. How do you do that?” Or maybe they noticed that the person always seems even-keeled, never letting anything overwhelm or upset them.

As they had more of these conversations and watched how those they admired behaved, they saw patterns. Then they adopted these behaviors themselves. Over time, they developed the practices they had admired in others. Bottom line: *You need to do the same thing if you’re going to become a better thinker and beat your decision fatigue. Trust me, it’s not that hard. It just takes some focus and perseverance.*

The first of these five essentials is **emulating the best thinkers around you**. These people will not necessarily be the official leaders in the organization. They are the individuals other people look to for ideas, guidance and inspiration. It might be the marketing guy who always seems to get to the essence of the problem before anyone else. Maybe it’s the operations manager everyone looks to when a project runs into an obstacle. Look around. Who does that where you work?

This is where you should begin. Ask yourself, “Who are the best decision-makers I know?” They might not be in one place. One person might be a co-worker. Another might be the leader of a volunteer organization. Maybe a third is someone you know from a past workplace. You don’t need a big list. Two or three is certainly enough to get started. You’ll discover others over time.

Once you've identified these people, ask yourself, "What are they doing that I should be doing?" What habits of mind do they practice that would benefit you as well? The best thinkers display a certain sense of consistency and self-discipline. This guides their words, actions and attitudes. Universally, they are optimists who look for the good in others. They practice certain rituals and routines that enable them to remain focused in the midst of pressure and chaos. Their personal outlook allows them to look past present crises and keep an eye on the ultimate goal. Wouldn't you like to possess this kind of energy and focus? You can, but it takes time to develop.

Finally, ask, "What are they not doing that I should not be doing?" Life is full of temptations and distractions. If you're not careful, these can turn into habits that sap your energy and impair your focus. You might be losing your edge every morning by checking social media or the news first thing. Wouldn't it be better to read something inspirational or go on a walk? Maybe it's that triple-shot caramel macchiato you that powers you up at 7 AM but drags you down by the middle of the morning. Perhaps you're distracted all day because you've positioned your desk to face everyone as they walk by. Those one-minute conversations can add up and sap your time. You get the idea.

The best thinkers surround themselves with other good thinkers. These individuals may be colleagues, friends, industry associates or other people they admire. These colleagues are a source of support, a resource for ideas and connections, and means for accountability. Talk to any of the decision-makers you admire.

Chances are, they belong to an informal group of peers to whom they turn for inspiration. The best decision-makers make fewer decisions. They've learned to leverage their time and energy by avoiding the sources of decision fatigue.

If you're going to beat the decision fatigue affecting your life, you need to adopt these practices. Get to know these people. Ask them about their habits and what they do to maintain their edge. Most will be happy to share. Understand, however, that they will expect you to practice the same habits and discipline they do if you want to become a part of their professional or social circle. (We'll talk more about habits of mind in the next chapter.)

The best thinkers are always taking stock. They look for ways to make fewer decisions. They are constantly looking to eliminate, delegate, or automate the tasks and problems that confront them every day. They ask questions like:

- *What am I doing that doesn't really need to be done?* Examples of this might be a routine they perform out of deeply ingrained habit. Perhaps it is a task that has lost its value. Even a 15-minute task once per week turns into an hour a month or one and half days per year.
- *What tasks and responsibilities can I delegate to others?* Too many times, we convince ourselves that completing a task is just easier than delegating it. Part of this rationalization is the sense of control we would lose. But in holding back, we add to our own burden. We also deprive someone else of the opportunity to learn something new.

- *What tasks can I automate?* It's been said that there's an app for everything. That might not be totally true, but there are certainly lots of applications that can be leveraged to reduce your day-to-day burden. Incidentally, the best thinkers come up with a list of possible tasks to automate and then delegate the task of finding these solutions to someone else.

If you implement the answers to these three questions, you will save hundreds of hours per year, plus the associated heartburn and fatigue.

The best thinkers have also dumped their pride. These decision-makers are great connectors. They'll ask for help from anyone. They recognize the value of reaching out for insights they may not have considered. They seek the people in any specialty, sometimes paying substantial fees for their expertise.

They are also insatiably curious. I have interviewed hundreds of influential government and corporate leaders over the years for projects I am working on. Most of the time, these interviews are limited in time due to schedules. Frequently, the person I'm interviewing will begin by asking me about myself just as a frame of reference. I'll provide a quick answer and they'll say, "That's interesting," and ask another question, and another, and another. Since we have a limited time for the interview, I've learned I must be assertive in transitioning the conversation to my questions or I'll run out of time. They're insatiably curious. This curiosity enables them to find the best resources and connections to help them better manage their time and decisions.

They also believe in the adage, “there’s no such thing as a dumb question.” Sometimes, the person providing the answer will realize how insightful the question actually is. For reducing decision fatigue, asking for help is one of the best places to start for a solution. While this book is full of great ideas, ask your peers as well. They’re facing the same distractions and demands as you. Why not sit and strategize together? Working collaboratively on a problem enables you to leverage your time, skills and knowledge.

The best thinkers keep their goals at the forefront. One of the sources of decision fatigue is the dissonance we feel when we can’t seem to complete what we want to accomplish personally and professionally because of all the distractions and micro-decisions we’re faced with. The best decision-makers are acutely aware of this challenge. They develop rituals around their goals to ensure they are not lost in the chaos of the daily work. These include:

- Reviewing them every morning to begin the day.
- Posting them prominently in their workspaces, vehicles, and other places they frequent.
- Announcing them to their respected colleagues or the members of their mastermind and asking those individuals to hold them accountable.

While establishing these rituals can feel strange at first, these thinkers recognize their value. When the distractions of the day arise, ingrained rituals like these help them remain focused. This also reminds them to eliminate, delegate or automate these nuisances, as mentioned above.

These are the essentials for overcoming your overwhelm. Practicing these ideas without good habits of mind, however, will not be a successful strategy. So, let's move on to developing those practices.

So, what are the take-aways from this chapter?

- The best thinkers emulate the best thinkers around them. They have no desire to reinvent the wheel. They would rather learn from others who have gone before them.
- The best thinkers surround themselves with other good thinkers. These individuals serve as mentors, accountability partners and a source of support when personal and professional challenges arise.
- The best thinkers are always taking stock. They recognize the value of having perspective and understanding the bigger picture. This relieves the pressures of uncertainty and enables them to make confident, stress-free decisions.
- The best thinkers have also dumped their pride. They are very aware of what they do not know and work to gain the insights they need. They are insatiably curious.
- The best thinkers keep their goals at the forefront. They benchmark decisions against their goals and are careful to maintain focus on the ultimate outcome.

CHAPTER SIX

A FEW WORDS ABOUT CHANGING HABITS

Let's talk about habits. Productive habits and routines are what drive the success of the best thinkers. They also enable these individuals to navigate the challenges of today's demanding and distracting world. Like everyone else, those who make the best decisions are confronted by the endless demands on time, the constant digital distractions, and society's never-ending temptations. As a response, they turn to the habits and routines they've developed to manage the decision fatigue that can result.

These habits and routines are not developed overnight, of course. Any habit you attempt to develop will take time. How much time depends on which research you believe. Conventional wisdom used to say 21 days. Current studies indicate more like thirty. But measuring habit mastery by time is not a good strategy anyway. Getting to thirty days does not mean your brain will suddenly accept this new routine or way of thinking. A productive

habit can be easily extinguished by a destructive habit if you revert to your old ways even briefly.

To diminish the influence of a destructive habit, you must replace it with a productive practice. This is sort of like overwriting the data on a computer drive. The previous information is still there. That's right – you can't completely erase a well-ingrained habit. Even when your brain has developed a neural pathway for a more productive routine, the old neural pathway will still be there. But the more you practice the new routine, the more you will become comfortable with it. That's the reason books and seminars on how to “get rid of your bad habits” can be misleading. (Admittedly, this is a VERY simplistic way of explaining the process.)

If you are going to introduce a new habit, you will need to alter your mindset. Trying to develop a new habit while still thinking about the old one undercuts your effort. If you attempt to reduce your social media use, for instance, you might say, “I'm not going to check Facebook. I'm not going to check Facebook.” But the brain hears the word Facebook and brings those images to mind, defeating your efforts.

And you are probably surrounded by triggers that make you think of the old habit. This is the reason why re-programming your mindset is so important. Today's digital technology is a contributing factor in this. Most consumer websites track what you watch or shop for. I went shopping for tires one day, for instance, and made a purchase within 24 hours. But I continued to receive tire ads in my email, on my phone and in my search results for close to 60 days thereafter. If you are trying to reduce your addiction to social

media, for example, you may still be bombarded with messages to lure you in, unless you unsubscribe and take other measures.

We are all creatures of habits, good or bad. Once we do something repeatedly, the brain feels more comfortable with that rhythm and routine. When you try to discontinue that rhythm or routine, the brain resists this effort. To put it simply, your brain doesn't like change.

Your brain's first job is to protect you. So, it will perceive anything unknown as a threat. When this happens, it responds two ways. First, it introduces two hormones into your nervous system, adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline is your "fight or flight hormone." It increases your heart rate and blood pressure along with redistributing blood to your muscles to maximize glucose (sugar energy) to your brain. Cortisol has been called "nature's alarm clock." It stimulates the synthesis of glucose to increase the concentration of sugar energy in your bloodstream and enhances your brain's ability to use it.

In addition, your brain will flood your attention with thoughts of what could go wrong based on your past experiences, your observations of others, or perhaps something you read or listened to. All of this happens in an instant, of course, using neurological functioning that is still not well understood.

When there is a physical threat present, such as an oncoming car, this instantaneous process works to keep you safe. But your brain can't distinguish between an unknown physical threat and an unknown emotional threat. This means that when you introduce a

new practice, the brain will respond to this unknown by triggering the process described above. As a result, you feel fearful of trying this new routine. Thoughts such as, “It might be uncomfortable. I might fail. I feel embarrassed. I might make things worse,” will fill your mind.

A while back, I took up mountain biking, for example. Those first dozen rides were emotionally challenging. Why? Because of the thoughts that filled my head as a novice. “I might fall and get hurt. I might look stupid. I might not be able to keep up with my friends.” And on and on. I did take a header over the handlebars early on. Luckily, I wasn’t injured. But after that, I became more like one of my peers because they had all done this as well. Over time, my brain accepted my new habit and I have become a competent and confident rider.

The best decision-makers recognize this type of challenge to establishing new routines. They become comfortable with being uncomfortable. When they decide to establish a new habit, they recognize they will experience some emotional discomfort at the start. To overcome this, they will acknowledge the existence of this discomfort in advance and compartmentalize it. They might think, “I know that this might be difficult at first. But I will overcome this discomfort as I practice and change my mindset.” They also remind themselves of other successful habits they have established and how those have served them over time.

They create a mental picture of how they will feel when the habit has become well established. They might even write down some benchmarks or parameters of how this habit will serve them.

Finally, they announce this new habit to the world. They don't say, "I don't do (fill in your favorite bad habit) anymore." Instead, they let friends and colleagues know what new practice they are developing and ask for support in holding them accountable. If possible, they will try to surround themselves with others who practice that same habit. As the saying goes, "success breeds success."

While establishing good habits is a key to managing decision fatigue, multitasking is one reason we feel it in the first place. We're going to spend the next chapter discussing the pros and cons of multitasking and how to avoid it when everyone thinks it's a great idea.

What are the take-aways from this chapter?

- Productive habits and routines are what drive the success of the best thinkers.
- A productive habit can be easily extinguished by a destructive habit if you revert to your old ways even briefly.
- To diminish the influence of a destructive habit, you must replace it with a productive practice.
- If you are going to introduce a new habit, you will need to alter your mindset.
- Your brain can't distinguish between an unknown physical threat and an unknown emotional threat. This means that when you introduce a new practice, the brain will respond to this unknown by triggering the same stressors.

OVERCOMING OVERWHELM

- The best decision-makers recognize the challenge to establishing new routines. In response, they work to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- They create a mental picture of how they will feel when the habit has become well established and then rehearse that mental picture repeatedly.
- They will surround themselves with others who practice that same habit as a system of support and encouragement.

MULTITASKING – A GREAT IDEA THAT DOESN'T WORK

What a concept! Complete two, three, even four tasks all at once. Think how much time and energy you'll save. Just one problem . . . IT DOESN'T WORK! The debate about whether multitasking improves performance has been going on for more than a decade. Those on one side argue that their ability to do two, three, or even four things at once gives them an edge on the day. Those on the other side argue that focusing on one task at a time produces a better outcome for each endeavor.

Based on interviews with thousands of decision-makers and my own experience, I've come down on the one-task-at-a-time side. In reviewing brain science research, I have become even more convinced that those who claim to successfully multitask are really deceiving themselves.

Neuroscientist, Daniel J. Levitan, Ph.D., author of *The Organized Mind*, explains it this way: “Multitasking has been found to increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol as well as the fight-or-flight hormone adrenaline, which can overstimulate your brain and cause mental fog or scrambled thinking. Multitasking creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively rewarding the brain for losing focus and for constantly searching for external stimulation.”

Levitan says, “Asking the brain to shift attention from one activity to another causes the prefrontal cortex and striatum to burn up oxygenated glucose, the same fuel we need to stay on task. The kind of rapid, continual shifting we do with multitasking causes the brain to burn through fuel so quickly that we feel exhausted and disoriented after a short time.”

Torkel Klingberg, M.D., Ph.D., author of *The Overflowing Brain*, observes, “How well we manage to multitask can be related to the information load on working memory. Often, we can do the tasks if one of them is automatic, such as walking. For an activity to be designated “automatic,” it no longer demands any activation of the frontal lobes. However, a working memory task can never be automatic, as the information it contains always has to be encoded through the continual activation of the frontal and parietal lobes. This is why it can be so difficult to do two working memory tasks at once.” You can’t attend to more than one task at the same time.

There are those who will argue that regardless of the research, they have no choice but to multitask. “It’s the only way I can keep up,” they’ll say. Or, “My boss claims she multitasks and expects

everyone else to do the same.” Those people have my sympathy. Well established beliefs die hard. But as Levitan puts it, “You’d think people would realize that they’re bad at multitasking and would quit. But a cognitive illusion sets in, fueled in part by a dopamine-adrenaline feedback loop, in which multitaskers *think* they are doing great.”

So, if you can’t multitask, how do you keep up? By focusing on one task at a time to completion or until you can’t progress due to a missing element, resource or decision. Yes, that requires concentration and the discipline to resist the temptation to do more. How do the best decision-makers get so much done if they don’t multitask? Over a few decades of interviewing and observing them, here’s what I’ve discovered:

First, they manage their energy – How much you get accomplished and how well you make decisions is directly affected by the glucose supply to which your brain has access. Too much (those two donuts with coffee) overloads your system. Too little (“I never eat breakfast”), deprives your brain of the glucose it needs to concentrate. Physical exercise, or lack thereof, has a similar impact. I am not an expert on nutrition. Neither are most great decision-makers. But they are aware of the impact of certain foods and levels of exercise have on their metabolism, especially as they age. Most maintain a diet and exercise routine they have honed over time. This produces the energy they need for the busy and demanding days they work through. The next time you come in contact with someone you consider a consistently good decision-maker, ask about their diet and exercise. Listen to what they say.

Second, they have a don't do list – Over the years, the best decision-makers have taken stock of the distractions and time-wasters draining their energy and leading to the temptation to focus on more than one task at time. For most, this not a list they've written down. It's more like a regimen of habits they've developed to deal with the environmental distractions and temptations we all face. Remember, the only way to break a bad habit is by replacing it with a more positive alternative. For instance, what is a time drain in your life that should be replaced by something more productive? The time you save will relieve some of the pressure you feel to multitask.

Third, they say "no" more often – This is not "buzz off." Instead, they find diplomatic ways of declining tasks, meetings, and other activities they find less than a good use of time and attention. This does not mean they are completely focused on themselves. Besides being high achievers on the job, many also contribute generously to their community. They just maintain a high expectation about time, investment, and outcome. They'd rather lead the endeavor, for instance, than serve under someone who is a less-than-adequate manager.

Fourth, they put a "clock" to it – They chunk their time. Rather than simply starting a project, they consider how long the project should take to complete and then work toward that timeline. Rather than simply attending a meeting, they determine their role and work to minimize their time commitment. Rather than inviting you to sit down in their office, they'll come to you and remain standing while the conversation takes place. They accomplish more

in shorter periods of time and lessen the probability that they'll have to double up to catch up.

Fifth, they ask themselves, "What does a successful outcome look like?" – In many cases, there can be more than one acceptable solution to an obstacle or problem. The best decision-makers are careful not to get hung up on one specific outcome if there are others just as good. They also recognize there are lots of times when good enough is good enough. Spending unnecessary time on perfection drains mental energy and wastes time. Consider a project you are working on right now or a decision you're facing. Have you asked yourself what success will look like? Is there room for more than one successful outcome? Are you spending time perfecting something where "good enough" will solve the problem or satisfy the stakeholders involved?

Sixth, they set aside time for personal balance and recovery—During a recent interview with a business owner, the conversation turned toward balance. Her strategy? "Airplanes are my escape zone," she said. "I read fun books. I watch a movie. I catch up on personal relationships. I chat with the person next to me. Sometimes I just sit and stare at the seat in front of me and let my thoughts take me where they will. When I deplane, I'm refreshed." What's your strategy for balance?

All of this takes self-discipline, of course, even enforcing time for recovery. But multitasking is not a solution. It is an obstacle to managing your decision fatigue. Which strategy can you begin right now to make the shift away from this unproductive practice?

So, what are the take-aways from this chapter?

- Multitasking creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop that rewards the brain for losing focus.
- The continual mental shifting we experience with multitasking causes our brain to burn through sugar energy so quickly we feel exhausted and disoriented after a short time.
- Here's how the best decision-makers get so much done if they don't multitask:
 - o They manage their energy.
 - o They have a "don't do" list.
 - o They say "no" more often.
 - o They put a "clock" to it by chunking their time and using other strategies to leverage their time.
 - o They ask, "What does a successful outcome look like?" when making decisions of significance.
 - o They set aside time for personal balance and recovery.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STRATEGIES

One of the driving philosophies behind *Overcoming Overwhelm* is to MAKE FEWER DECISIONS. This is easier said than done, of course. Besides our normal routines, we are inundated with unwanted distractions and temptations. We can't simply wave a magic wand over these nuisances and say, "BE GONE!" Most are like a brush fire. If you stamp them out in one place, they show up somewhere else.

Making fewer decisions is the secret weapon effective decision-makers use to conserve energy and focus on the decisions that count. After interviewing and observing more than 3000 of them, I've determined they do two things most people don't.

1. **They refuse to be bullied by the pressures of society.** It is human nature to respond to whatever shows up in your inbox, in your text messages, or on the phone. Rather than succumbing to others' demands, these individuals develop internal rules for dealing with unannounced tasks. They don't accept calls from numbers they don't recognize. They set aside specific times to respond to emails, Slack messages and other communication. They check social media *when they want*, without feeling they will miss out on some critical piece of information.

2. **They act with deliberation.** It is easy to feel pressured into making immediate decisions because of society's pace and the desire to just get them off your plate. Those who make the best decisions reject this notion. They know that most problems are not time-sensitive. Yes, a decision will have to be made, but not because of someone else's impatience or poor planning. They've learned the value of reflection and research. Besides, a number of these decisions can, and should, be delegated or bounced back to the person who posed them in the first place.

These two strategies, by themselves, enable effective decision-makers to make substantially fewer decisions. Does it take time to adopt these methods? Sure, but the reward is certainly worth the time and effort.

The strategies that follow have been broken into four categories over four chapters. As you read through them, you may think, "Why didn't I think of that before?!" Or you may think, "That makes no sense to me." That's okay. Some, in fact, many, will not fit your needs. A few well-implemented strategies may be all it takes to substantially reduce the decision fatigue you face every day.

I urge you to keep an open mind, however. Take time to read through the descriptions, rather than simply dismissing a strategy because the title doesn't appeal to you. Remember that each strategy you adopt will compel change. Change will trigger stress, even if you think the strategy is a really good idea. Therefore, attempt

one, two at most, at any one time. Considering all the other daily stressors we face, trying to overcome your overwhelm all at once will overwhelm you.

Make this book your own. Circle the strategies you want to implement. Then prioritize them according to how much of an impact you think each one will have on your decision fatigue. Then pick one and begin. Start small. Establishing a new life-altering habit can be a recipe for emotional disruption. Get used to the change these strategies will trigger, rather than rushing into a “total decision makeover.”

Recognize that in implementing most of these strategies, you will need to override a habit you may hold dear. Preserving your morning energy, for instance, may mean foregoing the stop for something warm and sweet on the way to work. Confining your social media participation to times outside of work will trigger feelings of withdrawal. Saying “no” more often may disrupt your desire to be everyone’s savior. But here’s the thing . . . Have you ever grown without discomfort? Overcoming decision fatigue is a form of growth.

So, let’s get started!

STRATEGIES – DIGITAL DEVICES AND APPS

Digital technology has always been based on the idea that bits and bytes will make our lives more convenient and easier to navigate. But as with most inventions, use comes with abuse. We now battle never-ending advertisements, reminders and other distractions that sap our focus and energy. Implementing one or more of these strategies will reduce the number of micro-decisions you need to make each day.

Defeat your APPoplexy – APPoplexy (not apoplexy) is having too many apps on your phone. These distract you from finding and opening the ones you really use. If you have screen after screen of apps, you probably have more than 100. How many do you really use? Maybe there's that convention app you downloaded last year for the meeting in Baltimore. Have you opened it since? How about that travel app someone recommended that you've never opened? Maybe it's that app you were forced to download to get the \$5 discount on hair tinting? Have you used it since?

Every time you swipe through all these unused apps, you're making lots of micro-decisions that drain energy. Go through your apps right now and uninstall at least one you don't use. Then every time you're waiting on line, waiting for a movie to start, riding the train, whatever, take a few seconds to uninstall another app you're not using. Finally, move the apps you use most to the first screen so you don't have to search for them. It is little steps like this that simplify your life.

Limit email response to scheduled intervals – We all have some fear of missing out (FOMO). We're afraid we won't see the critical email that will cost us our job. Maybe we'll miss the vendor's message, screwing up a \$1,000,000 sale. In reality, these worries just add unnecessary tension to our lives. Yes, you may work where the culture expects that all digital communication be answered right away. Maybe your supervisor has told you she wants you "available" at all times. Even then, there's room for interpretation. Meanwhile, you have trouble making the best decisions because of the constant pressure and distractions.

So, how do you limit your responses to defined periods? Try these three steps: First, review your typical day and determine: a) when you are the most productive and b) when your boss seems to need you the most. (I hope these times don't conflict). Second, let her know that you would be more productive if you could limit your responses to three defined times during the day. Chances are, she'll go along. Perhaps she's even doing this herself. Third, implement the plan. You will have to resist the urge at first to check email throughout the day. But that will pass. And here's a

secret. Co-workers, vendors and customers will adapt to your new routine. This practice, by itself, will immediately add energy and focus to your day.

Close your message apps when you're not using them – It's so easy to just leave your message apps open all the time. That way, you don't have to remember to check them. Unfortunately, they also become a daisy chain of distractions throughout the day. Just as you're about to focus on a project, someone sends a cartoon. Just as you're about to pull the trigger on an important purchase, you're distracted by a couple of spam emails.

Closing your message apps prevents these distractions. Feel uncomfortable doing it all day? Try it for the morning or the afternoon. Perhaps just an hour at a time. If you're used to being accessible all day long, this will feel uncomfortable at first. But the reward will be peace, quiet and fewer micro-decisions. Your colleagues, vendors and customers will adjust and even wish they had the discipline to do the same thing.

Sound off – Most digital applications come programmed with sound effects. At first, they're amusing. After a while, most become annoying. Worse still, they are an unnecessary drain on energy and focus. Every time you hear a chirp, bell, buzzer, ding, catcall, or other sound effect, your brain has to decide about whether it is worth paying attention to. We are already hounded by endless environmental sounds we can't avoid every day. Give your brain a rest by eliminating what audio distractions you can.

Save time by using decision assists – The best decision-makers are all about leveraging time and energy. If someone or something can do the work or decide for them, that's how to go. This includes managing the overwhelming number of systems and software applications we have to use. Some people understand these processes intuitively. Others struggle to manage the updates, new features and other bells and whistles. But whether or not you love them or hate them, why take time dealing with them if there is a decision assist that will eliminate the hassle altogether? These include password tools, automatic back-up programs, white list software, ad-blockers, pop-up blockers, and macros. Sign up for periodic digital device maintenance. While these can be a minor hassle to set up, they will provide seamless convenience, time savings, and relief from those worries about whether you backed-up all your photos and critical documents.

So, which strategy above is a good place to continue your journey toward successfully managing your decision fatigue? Remember, reducing the number of micro-decisions you make every day is an essential part of conserving the sugar energy you need to maintain concentration. Most of the micro-decisions we are compelled to deal with are a product of the digital technology in which we are all immersed. Once you've chosen one, just one, of these strategies, ask yourself three questions:

1. What specific outcome should I expect from implementing this idea? This way, you can compare the desired outcome to reality. The best decision-makers are always measuring the results of their time and investment.

2. What steps are necessary for me to implement it? The fewer, the better.
3. How can I best integrate this strategy into my normal routine?

CHAPTER NINE

STRATEGIES – WORKING WITH AND SUPERVISING OTHERS

Every organization is filled with people who vary in their abilities and attitudes about getting things done. Some are efficient and invested. Others punch the clock and do only what they're told. Some people respect others' time. Some people don't. Individuals who don't manage their own time well can be a significant time suck on those around them.

But we have to interact with all these co-workers, vendors and customers, some more than others. Use the strategies in this section to gain better control over how you interact with these individuals and reduce the number of unnecessary decisions you make. Not all will be applicable. But take a chance on the ones you think might work.

Say “no” more often – It is human nature to be accommodating when approached for a favor, to make a decision, or participate in an activity. Saying “No” can seem almost discourteous to many. But saying “No” may be the best action you can take. Why? Here are a few reasons:

1. You’re not the best person to make the decision or participate.
2. Adding this task to your plate will interfere with or impair your effectiveness in accomplishing more critical responsibilities.
3. The person asking may be just trying to “turf the task.”

One of the ways effective decision-makers manage their energy and focus is by avoiding less-than-strategic commitments. “But how do you say no?” you might be asking. Here are three responses that help:

- “Thanks for thinking of me. I just don’t think I’m the best match for this task.”
- “At this point, I can’t really take on another responsibility. I trust you’ll understand.”
- “You might approach _____. I think she might have more interest.”

Notice this list does not include, “I’d love to help, but . . .” This phrase telegraphs you are open to other opportunities. As a result, people will continue to approach you. Remember, you have every right to be selective about the decisions, tasks, and other

responsibilities you take on (unless, of course, they are assigned by the boss).

Frame commitments with time-limiting phrases – How many “quick” decisions have ended up taking a heck of a lot longer? You know the drill. The other person doesn’t have a well-formed question. They lack critical information. Maybe they begin by saying, “We haven’t seen each other in a long time. So, how’s the family?” Every time this happens, you can feel your sugar energy draining away.

The solution to managing these situations is to be ready with a response that will confine the encounter to a short and efficient use of time. Here are a few ways to phrase your response:

- “Sure, I’ve got a minute.”
- “Sure, I’ve got three minutes right now. Will that work?”
- “Yes, let’s take five minutes right now to make a decision on this.”
- “I’d be happy to help. Do you have all the details so we can make a decision right now?”
- “I’d be happy to help, but I am committed right now. I’ve got ten minutes at the end of the day.”

There are other variations. Adapt one of these or develop a response that works best for you.

Train the people around you to get to the point – Have you ever been in a fifteen-minute meeting where the person asking for a decision takes 13 minutes to clearly explain what's needed? The best decision-makers recognize the drain this behavior places on their energy and focus and they don't tolerate it. How?

1. If they supervise these individuals, they take the time to coach them upfront on the art and science of asking concise and well-conceived questions.
2. If they are meeting with peers, they are proactive about what the bottom-line issue or decision is needed upfront. That lets everyone know there is at least one person in the room who wants to remain on task.
3. In both settings, they offer summary statements if they detect the discussion is drifting or losing focus. These statements begin with phrases such as:
 - “So, the decision we need to make is . . .”
 - “What I am gathering from this discussion is that we need to . . .”
 - “So, when we walk away from this meeting, we will have decided . . .”

You may find this abrupt at first. But effective decision-makers know that sometimes it takes someone to jog the discussion to reach a timely conclusion.

Use these phrases to shorten meetings – It is well accepted throughout business that we hold too many meetings. While these gatherings are necessary, most are too long and inefficient. You may not be able to control the time, length and topics of your boss's meetings, but you can control yours and influence those of your peers. Use these phrases to make that happen:

1. At the beginning of the meeting, ask, "So, what are we going to achieve here?"
2. If you sense the meeting is drifting, "Can we take a minute to review what we're trying to accomplish."
3. "I feel like we're getting off track. What exactly are we're trying to decide?"

As in the previous strategy, you might find this approach a bit abrupt at first. In fact, someone in the gathering might even say something like, "There he goes again, trying to rush us along." But most people know their meetings lack efficiency and will seek to refocus their efforts after you call their attention to it.

Stand-up meetings – The vast majority of meetings are conducted sitting down. People are social beings. They enjoy gathering to do the work but also want to catch up with others' lives, discuss office politics and have a bit of fun. If you are discussing a major initiative, this is to be expected. But what about the morning update or the project check-in? Don't sit down. Meet in a common area, on the factory floor, perhaps while you walk to another meeting. Will this throw people off guard at first?

Yes, but they'll get used to the cadence and adapt. It will shorten discussions, create more pressure for an efficient decision, and keep you energized.

Delegate more effectively – Delegation is easy to explain. It's a lot harder to execute effectively. But the best decision-makers succeed in doing so. This reduces the burden on their own energy. How do they accomplish this? From my observation, it comes down to four principles:

1. They develop a clear vision of what they are delegating. Delegation is both art and science. As an art, you need to get the people you are managing to be invested in what they're doing. This means developing trusting relationships. As a science, it is being clear about the tasks and the expectations you are assigning.
2. They nurture the person to whom they are delegating the task. Have you ever been delegated a task and had no idea how it fit into the overall effort? Did you feel motivated? Were you really inspired to do the best job you could? Those who delegate effectively take time to explain the context behind the task. This promotes ownership.
3. They are careful to make sure the tasks they delegate stay delegated. When questions come up and uncertainty sets in, too many people go back to the boss and say, "I don't know how to do this." When this happens enough, the boss gives in says, "Okay, I'll do it myself." If you are going to delegate effectively, you need to persist in making sure the delegated task stays delegated.

Sometimes, this problem results from poor or rushed directions at the beginning.

Other times, the person needs to be coached on how to think independently and creatively. Granted, this does take some effort and perseverance upfront. But over time, delegated tasks will stay delegated and performed well.

4. They inspect the work performed according to the expectations set down initially. It can be discouraging when going to a boss with a completed task, only to be told, “No, that’s not what I wanted,” or “I know I told you to do this, but I’ve changed my mind.” This results in wariness about taking the boss’s direction at face value. When inspecting the outcome of delegated tasks, use the written expectations you provided at the beginning. (You did write down a description of the task and your expectations, didn’t you?)

Those who are effective at delegating also recognize that it is a great way to develop future talent and improve employee retention. Those who embrace delegated tasks and work hard to complete them are the future leaders in an organization. When these individuals are rewarded with promotions and increased influence, they remain with the organization.

Effective delegation relieves the best decision-makers from many of the daily tasks that can drain energy and divert focus. This provides time for more important opportunities and responsibilities. (This book is not the place to go into a full-blown tutorial on delegating effectively. Go to commonsenseenterprises.net for suggested resources.)

Compel others to solve problems – Observe effective decision-makers and you'll see them elicit confident and independent decisions from those around them. How?

First, they teach those they supervise effective problem solving and decision-making practices. The Common Sense Enterprises website is full of great resources on how to do this. You might begin by reading the blog post on implementing “think alouds.”

Second, they set clear expectations about responsibility and who should be making what decisions. Many in our society have become hesitant, even fearful, of making decisions for which the outcome is unknown. But if everyone seeks the boss's blessing before acting, business slows to a crawl. Just as important for our purposes, this practice adds to the boss's decision fatigue.

Taking time to establish clear expectations and parameters upfront will make a big difference. Just provide enough latitude to make decisions without them having to check in all the time. If this happens, loosen the reins. Better still, ask how much authority they need to perform the task effectively. Competent decision-makers will be able to answer concisely. Those who hesitate will need more coaching.

Third, top thinkers refuse to make others' decisions. Instead, they coach individuals through the appropriate process to come to the best decision. They also reinforce that they have the employee's back should something unforeseen happen. This reassures the person they will not be the focus of blame should the decision turn out to be the wrong one.

Manage your boss's expectations and assignments –

Managers sometimes do a less-than-optimal job in delegating tasks and responsibilities. Subordinates are confused about the priority of what needs to be done. This ends up in missed deadlines, unnecessary stress and less-than-quality work. The best decision-makers cannot always avoid this fate, of course. Sometimes, the best thinkers aren't the official leaders. (You might be in this situation yourself.)

Their solution is to manage the boss's expectations and assignments. This is not as difficult as you might assume. The key is getting the boss to understand that allowing you this latitude will relieve some of their burden without detracting from their power and influence. It is all in the way you frame the approach. You might say something like, "I can imagine what a full plate you must have, I'd like to help. So, I've been thinking about the work you've assigned to me. I came up with a plan for making myself more productive. Mind if I share it?"

You don't want to appear patronizing. You want to demonstrate you're helpful. It is in everyone's best interest if you can work more effectively. If the boss takes credit, so be it. You have been able to reorganize your responsibilities to reduce time and energy consumption. This is what the best decision-makers do.

Some supervisors are more open to this approach than others. This might have to do with the boss's level of confidence and desire for control. If your ideas are rejected, you might say something like, "I understand. I just don't feel like I am as productive as I could be. What would you suggest?" If that goes nowhere, reconsider

your employment situation. (Sorry for being that direct. But I am reflecting the beliefs of a smart decision-maker.)

Proactively manage your interactions with people who are demanding and difficult –Personalities can vary widely in any organization. Some people are more accommodating than others, to put it politely. This latter group can require more mental energy. In observing those who manage their time and energy well, I've noticed three approaches they use when these difficult people come into their sphere.

1. They try to meet these individuals in neutral locations.
2. They arrange phone and personal contact just before another commitment and frame it that way to avoid unnecessary contact.
3. They try to anticipate the difficult person's agenda and work to mitigate concerns before they come up. When confronted, they say something like, "You know, I thought of that." Then they offer a solution. Even if that solution is rejected, they are perceived as solutions-oriented, leaving less space for griping.

None of this is failsafe. But when it works, it enables effective decision-makers to conserve energy and focus for more significant matters.

Manage other people's requests on your time and focus – Mostly, we like to help people when asked. Often, these requests are minor and easy to complete. But then there are those occasions when someone asks you to help with something more substantial.

Volunteer positions within associations are a good example of this.

Decision-makers mindful of their energy and focus will ask, “What would this involve?” before making a commitment. Many have discovered through experience that the volunteer position that offers “great opportunities” also means a substantial time commitment. They’ve learned to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of participation carefully. This does not mean they’re unwilling to contribute their time. They just want to be fully aware of what they’re getting into. In some cases, they will negotiate to take on a part of the responsibility, leaving the remainder to others.

Use the words “other commitment” to avoid meetings or exit early – This little phrase provides a diplomatic escape from many a situation with which you don’t want or choose to be involved. No one will ask, “What’s the other commitment?” Trust me. You shouldn’t use this to dodge legitimate responsibilities, of course. But it sure does come in handy at times.

Compartmentalize your daily response times – With the exception, perhaps, of your boss, there is not a person out there who will not understand if you clear email, texts, Slack messages, and Zoom chats at scheduled times. Yes, we have become a society that expects instant outcomes. The most effective decision-makers accept that notion – and then respond at a time of their choosing anyway. If someone objects to this, these individuals explain their reasoning and encourage that person to adopt the same practice. Compartmentalization allows them to ignore the pressure most people feel about having to respond immediately, regardless of the message or its significance. If you don’t believe me, send me an

email at bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net. I'll get back to you in a timely way when my schedule allows.

Don't be a hero and save other people from their poor planning – You've probably seen the poster that reads, "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute a crisis on my part." Yet too many times, we succumb to others' panicked requests to save their butts. Decision-makers who effectively manage energy and focus are careful to weigh these requests for help, even if they have empathy for the person asking. If this is a one-time crisis, pitching in can be a great way to build goodwill, relationships and contribute to the common good. But if this person has a track record of waiting until the last minute, pitching in may just reinforce his folly. This new commitment is just adding to your mental burden without a return on investment.

Call rather than text or email when the decision requires a conversation – For seasoned readers, this advice might seem like common sense. For those who have come of age with smartphones and tablets, this advice may trigger discomfort. (I'll let you decide where you fall along this continuum.)

For effective decision-makers, this choice is all about efficiency. Sending digital messages back and forth for an hour or more when a two-minute conversation will resolve the question seems nonsensical. Yet this behavior persists in workplaces all over the world. The best thinkers I've observed take a minute to develop clarity about what needs to be decided. Then they call with an introduction like, "I just figured it would be more efficient if we chatted about this situation for a couple of minutes, rather than

going back and forth with email. Do you have a bit of time?” Inevitably, the person says “yes” just to get it off their plate.

If the person doesn’t answer, these individuals will leave a concise message about the issue and a request to call back during a specific time or send a message with their decision or resolution. No, this does not work flawlessly. But it initiates the effort to be more efficient. Once again, fewer decisions. Less decision fatigue.

Surround yourself with people who feed your energy
– When I worked as a teacher in my twenties, I frequented the school’s faculty lounge at the beginning of my first year. After a few months, however, I realized the “grippers” dominated the ongoing conversation. These complaints would go on hour after hour and sometimes carried over into the next day. I wasn’t the most enlightened soul at age twenty-two. But even then, I realized it was a toxic environment. So, I sought other more positive-minded souls within the school.

If you observe them, you’ll notice that the best decision-makers avoid toxic environments and quietly excuse themselves from ones they become involved with. Positive energy feeds positive energy. Allowing yourself to be dragged into someone’s negative conversation can have a devastating impact on your personal energy and focus over time.

In reviewing the strategies in this chapter, which one (Again, start with just one.) appears to be the best way to reduce your decision fatigue in relation to working with others? As I mentioned above, you may experience some emotional discomfort as you alter

how you relate to co-workers, vendors, customers and even your boss. Remember, the brain does not like changes in behaviors and habits. But by anticipating this resistance and finding ways to compartmentalize it, you can reduce the decision fatigue you feel by reducing the decisions you are compelled to make. Once you've chosen a strategy, ask yourself three the questions as before:

1. What specific outcome should I expect from implementing this idea? This way, you can compare the desired outcome to reality. The best decision-makers are always measuring the results of their time and investment.
2. What steps are necessary for me to implement it? The fewer, the better.
3. How can I best integrate this strategy into my normal routine?

CHAPTER TEN

STRATEGIES – NAVIGATING THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Whether you work at home, in a cubicle, in an office or in the field, you are surrounded by people and circumstances requiring decisions large and small. Many of these decisions depend on collaboration with others. You deal with distractions, personalities, and sometimes conflicting expectations and procedures. Yet, effective decision-makers navigate these elements with efficiency. After meeting with thousands of them, here are some of the strategies they use to conserve energy and focus during demanding days. Once again, not every strategy will be a good fit for you. But consider them all.

Maintain a daily to-do list—Your first thought might be, “Well, duh!” when I suggest this. But for others, this practice just creates

a pressure to organize days that, by their nature, unpredictable. If you're in a position where organization is the rule, a to-do list will help relieve the stress of keeping on top of assignments. I, for instance, have lived by daily and weekly to-do lists for years. I credit a good deal of my success and productivity to this process. (There is a plethora of time management software options on the web, many free for downloading.)

If, however, you're in a position whose very nature is chaos, such as expeditor, customer service supervisor or practice manager, attempting to maintain a to-do list may prove to be a maddening exercise that just adds to your decision fatigue. To-do lists are not for everyone. You'll have to decide whether it is right for you. Just remember, however, that the brain craves organization and certainty.

Develop a don't-do list – Sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? But this is another secret weapon of effective decision-makers. This doesn't mean they get up every morning and remind themselves of what not to do. Instead, they develop creative ways to discourage these distractions. One individual told me he doesn't read or listen to the news until the end of day. He doesn't want the day's political and social dramas to clutter his mind. So, he has removed all news apps from the digital devices he uses. (Considering the endless ads on browsers and TV screens in public spaces these days, this is not fail-safe. But it is a start.)

Another person told me she places her smartphone in the car after 9 PM. That way, if she's tempted to check it, she has to walk all the way into the garage to do so. A third person, who's an extrovert,

recognized how many short conversations turned into 30-minute bull sessions because he likes to chat. So, he sets the timer on his phone to five or ten minutes and it vibrates in his trouser pocket. These “little” habits and temptations can accumulate over time and become a significant energy drain that takes the edge off your decision-making fuel. Make a don’t-do list for yourself and get creative about ways you can implement it.

Practice Inbox Zero – This is a structured thought process for triaging and clearing your email inbox every day. Several leaders and managers I’ve come in contact with rely on it to maintain control over their inboxes. As with other structured productivity methods, you have to be willing to follow the routine closely for it to be truly effective. Google “inbox zero” for lots of information and resources.

Clean and organize your workspace regularly – A cluttered workspace fosters a cluttered mind. Why? The piles that typically cover desks, tables and chairs can drain your energy. You keep thinking, “No, that’s not it. No, that’s not it,” as you rifle through them to find what you need. The same is true for the thousands of documents and spreadsheets present in our digital lives. Every time we search for what we need, we are expending the sugar energy (blood glucose) needed to focus on the actual task. When we finally find what we need, we may have lost that edge of concentration needed to launch into the project.

It’s easy to say, “Who’s got the time to organize this mess?” But then you work at cross purposes. The best thinkers know, for instance, that maintaining documents in broad categories works

better than micro-categorizing everything. They take the time to develop a system for organizing documents. (There are ample ideas on-line for how to do this.) Pick the one that works best and then develop the discipline to use it. If you have others working for you, teach them the system and demand they follow your lead. The result? You can find what you need in their files and they in yours. If a system is already in place, seek input on how it can be improved. Most people have these ideas but are reluctant to share them unless asked.

The same is true for your physical surfaces. Set aside time once per week to clear the work areas around you. Err on the side of discarding these items rather than worrying about the very few times you'll have to search for another copy. Once again, those who manage their mental energy effectively recognize that the fewer distractions they have around them, the less their mind will wander and worry. (Mind wandering consumes blood glucose.)

Employ different spaces for different projects – Neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, recommended that if you're working on two completely separate projects, dedicate one desk or table for each. Just stepping into a different space hits the reset on your brain and allows for more productive and creative thinking.

Use different pads to record ideas and insights about different tasks/projects – One executive I interviewed uses as many as six pads of paper to track the responsibilities and projects he oversees. Even in this age of efficiency software, he finds this process to be most effective. Rather than waking up his tablet or smartphone, opening a note-taking app and finding the right tab, he picks up

the right pad and jots a note or question. Considering that the brain's short-term memory lasts no more than five or six seconds, this technique enables him to capture the thought immediately rather than spending valuable seconds for the “convenience” of digital technology. Doing this reduces the apprehension he will lose the thought in the interim. (Apprehension is worry and worry is a needless drain on your energy.)

Chunk your time – Several years ago, I interviewed the chief operating officer of a large defense contractor. Ultimately, she oversees 12,000 people. Lisa divides each of her ten-hour days into 40 fifteen minute “chunks.” This provides several advantages: 1) It enables her to track her time and see patterns in her commitments; 2) It compels those meeting with her to be organized and concise. “If you have requested 15 minutes to ask a question or resolve an issue, I expect you to be prepared,” she said. 3) It compels Lisa to be decisive. “I do not like rolling decisions over to another time,” she said. “It becomes a source of frustration and something I want to avoid at all costs.”

Granted, you probably don't oversee 12,000 people. But how can you adapt this practice to your daily commitments and responsibilities? The brain craves organization and predictability. This is an effective way to reduce the chaos and uncertainty around you.

Conduct online searches just before another commitment – Too often, on-line searches can turn into time-consuming adventures that drain energy, focus and time. (After all, that's what the search engines are designed to do.) By placing another

commitment at the end of the search time, you will compel yourself to work more efficiently and ignore the inevitable distractions and click bait. There's nothing like a sense of urgency to keep a person on task.

You might also ask someone else to conduct the search. One decision-maker I interviewed told me he "turfs" online searches to others. "This addresses two issues," he said. "First, it saves me time. Second, it forces me to really focus on the information I need. Otherwise, I can't give the person doing the search clear direction." (This also brings in a different perspective on the search and information needed, which may benefit the overall effort.)

Be careful of using social media as a source of relief after a period of focus – I know, it's tempting. You just completed the project and you deserve a reward. Or maybe you're tired of reviewing the budget and your eyes need a rest. It's so easy to just open up YouTube to watch one short video. But then which one? There are so many. Because Google's algorithm has gotten to know you, they all look interesting. You watch a three-minute clip, but the next one looks interesting as well and you may not be able to find it again if you close the browser. Suddenly, you look at the clock and realize your five-minute break has turned into half an hour.

The solution? Have an analog distraction at the ready. This takes you away from the screen and has a beginning and an end. "Like what?" you might be thinking. I play solitaire (with actual playing cards). They are within reach at all times. The average game takes about five minutes to play and serves as a restful distraction when

I need a brief break from the task at hand. (I even win sometimes.) If you're not a solitaire fan, try Suduko. Read that magazine article you haven't gotten to. Just stay away from the screen. It is designed to suck you in.

Have a separate monitor for social media – I spoke with the owner of an architectural design firm. He and his team were struggling with employees who spent a great deal of time switching back and forth from the computer-aided design on their screens to checking the latest updates on Facebook and Linked-In. Each one of those switches consumes about 15 seconds. Done hundreds of times a month, we're talking real hours here. The solution? The firm purchased a small screen for each of their people to use for social media. It is placed next to the larger screen where the design work is done. This way, they can glance back and forth without opening and closing applications. Remember, even in an age of handheld devices, you consume a certain amount of blood glucose every time you glance at social media, considerably more if you get sucked in.

Consider time blocking -- Time blocking is the practice of planning out every moment of your day in advance and dedicating specific time "blocks" for certain tasks and responsibilities. It has been my observation that few decision-makers practice this for entire days. But a number will plan their top productivity times around this technique. Ample resources can be found online to help you get started. Just search on the keywords "time blocking planner" or "time blocking app."

Give yourself time and push back if you're pressured with unrealistic deadlines – Some people live for the stress of chaotic deadlines. Those in the news media and restaurant kitchens come to mind. But the rest of us generally have these stressors pressed on us. Perhaps we encourage it through procrastination and indecision. We make dumb choices, careless mistakes and settle for second best because we didn't have the time and energy to perform at our peak.

The best decision-makers in any environment recognize what these conditions cost. Then they work to preempt those situations. They plan projects with a buffer. They give the people they've assigned tasks to a buffer as well. That way, everything comes together with fewer glitches and better outcomes. Some people enjoy the pressure of working against tight deadlines. The best thinkers would rather do the best job they can and enjoy the reward of a stress-free outcome.

When someone asks or even demands, that they rush to complete an assignment, they push back. They might say something like, "You do want me to make the best decision, don't you?" or "That's a really tight deadline. I don't know that I'll be able to do my best work under that constraint." Usually they can negotiate more time. If not, the responsibility for the outcome falls on the person assigning the task.

It is time, once again, to select one, just one, of the strategies above and consider how to implement it. Remember that as you continue to work in the environment, you will be reminded of how you used to do things. There will be a temptation to return to your old ways, especially if you see co-workers practicing these habits.

You have to be clear and determined as to why you are adopting a new practice. This will take time, but the reward will be more time and energy. As before, once you've chosen a strategy, ask yourself the three questions:

1. What specific outcome should I expect from implementing this idea? This way, you can compare desired outcome to reality. The best decision-makers are always measuring the results of their time and investment.
2. What steps are necessary for me to implement it? The fewer, the better.
3. How can I best integrate this strategy into my normal routine?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STRATEGIES – LEVERAGING PERSONAL ROUTINES

We are all products of the routines we develop over time. Most work quite well. But then there are those that are outdated, overly complex, done because of peer pressure, or other emotional desires. If you observe them, effective decision-makers work conscientiously to eliminate these time- and focus-wasters.

Begin every day with a success or completion – Admiral William McRaven, former commander of the US Special Operations Command, has become famous for a speech he gave during a University of Texas commencement. In it, he recommended graduates begin every day by making their beds. His point was that beginning the day with a completion or success, no matter how small, provides that first step in the momentum essential to getting

a productive start on the day. The decision-makers I've interviewed have established routines that enable them to approach each day with energy and focus. This might be a workout, a walk or run, a devotional routine, or an inspirational podcast on the way to work. Develop a routine that works for you, but for heaven's sake, get a good start to every day.

Take a cleansing breath – If you pay attention, you will notice that your breathing becomes shallower in times of stress and uncertainty. With the pace of today's society and demands for immediate outcomes, these situations arise frequently. As mentioned in Chapter Four, your brain responds to these surprises and uncertainties by triggering the release of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol into your nervous system. This chemical reaction drains energy and distracts focus. You must manage this phenomenon to regain your productivity.

The thing to do in these circumstances is to take a deep breath, or even two. This has two impacts. First, taking a breath introduces oxygen into your body, which helps to diminish the effect of these hormonal surges. Second, it buys you a few seconds to reflect on the situation rather feeling like you need to react right away. This is especially helpful in situations where someone has said or done something unexpected and you feel compelled to respond.

Work to limit your choices – Society has become a marketplace of endless options. You have only to look at the toothpaste varieties in the supermarket or the 400 shades of white paint at the home center. The best thinkers, in my observation, structure their decisions to avoid these overwhelming choices. As a result, they can

conserve their energy and focus for more important endeavors. They ask salespeople for recommendations, rather than fearing they'll be sold something they don't want. They insist that subordinates come to them with options and a recommended course of action when a decision needs to be made. Rather than reinventing the wheel, they network with others to find out who has already solved a similar problem or has a ready-made solution. The fewer the options, the easier it is to make a decision.

Don't leave little tasks hanging – Have you ever heard of the Zeigarnik Effect? When you begin a task, your brain notes your doing so and files it away. But as you navigate throughout the day, it will continue to send reminders of these unfinished tasks. These reminders will distract you from focusing on present work, sort of like the endless loop in the movie *Groundhog Day*.

Simplify what you wear – Orderly habits improve self-control by triggering automatic mental processes that require little energy. This is one reason Steve Jobs always wore a black turtleneck and jeans. It enabled him to use clothes choosing energy elsewhere. Your brain craves certainty and predictability. Every decision consumes some of the blood glucose that fuels your body. When you spend five minutes in the closet every morning deciding on the perfect apparel, the energy you spend there cannot be used elsewhere. Granted, this may be more difficult for some than others. (I know men who struggle with this just as much as women.) But if you search online for the keyword phrase "simplify what you wear," you will discover a plethora of strategies for doing so.

Hire out the little stuff – Life is full of tiny tasks and routines. We all wish a genie would appear at times to fold the clothes, mow the lawn, shop for food and prepare the meals. Then again, most of us write off those ideas as too expensive, too much trouble to set up, or even dangerous.

Finally, some of us think, “They would never get it done the way I like it.” This leaves you with a choice: 1) Let go of some of your control and save energy or 2) Stick to what you’ve always done and suffer from continuing fatigue? Once again, much of this resistance is fostered by the brain’s desire to keep you safe and away from discomfort generated by the new and unknown.

Now, more than ever before, there are services available to complete every task you’ve ever faced. These services provide vetted individuals who work at your whim. Will this cost money? Yes, but you have to decide on the balance between time, energy and focus and the cost of achieving this peace of mind.

Confine social media to certain times and amounts – I know this is easier said than done, considering the emotional desire to stay in the loop. But consider the time and energy expended. Every post you review consumes a bit of the blood glucose that fuels your brain. That’s why spending 30 minutes on Facebook or Instagram looking at hundreds of posts leaves you feeling tired.

What do the best thinkers do to overcome this temptation? Here are three tactics I’ve observed. First, they ask themselves how important social media is to their success. Someone in sales may find it indispensable, especially if their customers spend a lot of

time online. Even then, it helps to verify this before devoting too much time posting and networking on these platforms. If the job does not require this kind of interaction, then social media should play no more than a minor role in day-to-day activity. It is impossible to ignore social media and attempting to eliminate it is a fool's errand.

Second, the best thinkers prioritize and schedule and their use of social media. Consider the platforms on which you participate. How important is each to your success and your relationships? For many in business, participation on Linked-In takes precedence over other social media. If you're in retail, you may spend a lot more time on Facebook or Pinterest because your customers do. If you run a restaurant, you may maintain a Twitter following to promote daily specials. Those who use these platforms most effectively develop and implement a plan. This way, they make fewer decisions and experience less decision fatigue. They may even contract out part of their social media presence to someone who can do it efficiently and with an expertise they don't need to develop.

Third, they practice "out of sight, out of mind." Social media will become all-consuming if you allow it. This includes the endless texts, pop-ups, surveys, emails, and traditional advertising reminding us to stay connected. Even if your smartphone is turned off and locked away in a drawer, you'll receive reminders on your other digital devices. Those best at managing all these distractions are proactive at eliminating these interruptions. They have developed a mindset that relegates social media to an afterthought in the midst of an otherwise productive and organized life. They

have let go of the societal pressure to stay connected just to stay connected.

Take time for reflection after significant decisions – Those in law enforcement, fire service and the military are known for their decision-making prowess. After all, their lives depend on it. They complete an “after-action” report at the conclusion of every incident or operation. These reports ask questions like, “How could we have accomplished this mission in fewer steps? Were the right people involved? What did we have that we didn’t need? What did we not have that we needed? What happened that we did not expect? What can we learn from that?” And so on. The best thinkers do the same thing.

This exercise should not be a sixty-minute exploration of all the pros and cons. Five to ten minutes will do. But it is critical to step back and consider what you have learned. Effective decision-makers maintain a record of what they’ve learned from their decisions. This is generally in a notebook or a digital app. I know colleagues with a collection of these that date back through the years of their career. These documents serve as a record they can rely on when needed. It also relieves them of having to scramble to recall details when faced with a similar situation or decision. Once again, this practice enables them to make fewer decisions but with more focus.

Eliminate your hustle porn – Have you ever had someone spend five minutes explaining how they don’t have time to talk to you right now? That’s hustle porn. Hustle porn is bragging to everybody about how busy you are. The truth is no one cares. Sorry to be so blunt, but we live in a world of insecurity and desires for

self-importance. Our culture reinforces this through media that lionizes the young entrepreneur who works 80 hours a week and still has time to compete in Iron Man triathlons. Besides being exaggerated, these stories are misleading. The best thinkers refuse to buy-in to these cultural pressures. Instead, they carefully choose their endeavors and perform them to the best of their ability. By taking this approach, they have more time for other hobbies and adventures that will re-energize them and feed their soul.

Stop your doomscrolling – Doomscrolling is getting sucked into the media-produced dramas occurring in our world these days. This includes keeping a browser open to MSNBC, CNN, Fox, Google News, Facebook and Twitter, not wanting to miss even a tiny update to whatever story has you consumed at the moment. After a while, all that tension drains you. You think about it constantly. It seems to be the topic of every conversation. You wake during the night worrying you missed something. Imagine the drain on your energy by doing this. Yet all of broadcast and social media promotes these behaviors. These companies are not in the business to inform. They're in the business of making money using eyeballs and clicks. The best decision-makers I know are not generally current on the latest dramas and trending issues. They use their energy and focus on more significant decisions and efforts. How about you?

Establish and maintain routine escapes – Many of the executives I've interviewed take two to three hours every week to focus on projects and decisions that require substantial concentration. They do this away from the office and generally in a location where

there are no distractions. (The local café with its big-screen TVs won't do.) Those on their staff know that the building has to be on fire for them to interrupt their boss's concentration. Often, the people who do this maintain a folder of projects/decisions to be considered during this time. Once a task has been added to this folder, they stop thinking about it during the rest of the week's activities. This serves as one more way to reduce the number of decisions they are making. If asked about the task's disposition, their response will be something like, "I'll be completing that on Thursday afternoon." That's a signal not to bug them about it.

You may not think you're in a position to do this. But I'd be careful about jumping to that conclusion. In these times of more flexible work environments, even individual contributors can simply remove themselves from the daily distractions and pressures without someone wondering why. So, take advantage of this new leverage and reduce the pressures on your decision-making.

Set and enforce planned respites – Simply said, what gets scheduled gets done. You probably know what it's like. You've been talking about getting away for a quick vacation for months. Maybe you stop to daydream about that resort you'd like to visit. Then you are snapped back into reality by a tweet, a text, an email or a Slack message. "I *really* need to schedule this," you think. But then your brain lists all the unfinished tasks that need to be completed first. (Brains do that because thinking about vacations promotes thoughts of uncertainty and the unknown. Remember?)

The best decision-makers recognize there will never be the perfect time for a respite. They also recognize the value of purposely

removing themselves from the “rat race.” Notice I did not say “escape.” Escape implies that you’re breaking the rules or doing something wrong. These individuals look at these times away as an opportunity for relaxation, adventure, learning, and reflection. Many of those I have interviewed schedule several of these periods at the beginning of the year and then protect these times, regardless of the demands. A significant element in successfully managing decision fatigue is believing you have control over your time. Scheduling periodic respites is a perfect example of this practice.

Be proactive about scheduling maintenance – Bald tires and overdue oil changes sit in the back of your mind and drain energy. So do computers that haven’t be backed up. Every time you see a Jiffy-Lube, a Discount Tire store or an ad for back-up software, your brain diverts your attention to this uncompleted task. Over time, these thoughts consume the sugar energy that could be conserved and used elsewhere. Effective decision-makers schedule maintenance-related tasks and have them completed on time. This enables them to focus energy on more significant endeavors. It also allows them to manage their everyday lives with less stress.

With today’s digital calendar apps, you can schedule every imaginable task at the beginning of the year. Then simply initiate these tasks when reminded. The fewer tasks and decisions your brain has to retain, the more peace of mind you will have and the more energy you will have for other challenges. Besides, repairs are almost always more expensive than maintenance.

Consciously avoid environments with temptations – Many would say this seems obvious. But, have you ever tried to break a

habit while remaining in the environment where you spent so much time practicing it? You might not be doing this consciously. It's just that most habit formation takes place where we do everything else. So, if you decide to cut down on eating, you can't stay out of the kitchen. If you decide to reduce your social media use, you can't stop using your laptop, tablet or smartphone.

You also face the challenge of association. The brain functions based on association. It creates what neuroscientists call "schemas." These schemas are brain-based processes for functioning in the world. If you need to fry an egg, there is a schema for that. If you need to change a tire, there's a schema for that. Even if you need to unlock a door, you use a schema to do so. As mentioned in Chapter Six, the same is true for habits, both productive and unproductive. This means you might be surrounded by environmental cues that will trigger the desire to use the schemas of habits you are trying to eliminate. The more the environment triggers thoughts of these unproductive habits, the more energy you spend thinking about how you shouldn't be thinking about them. Just sitting in the environment while trying to resist those temptations can leave you exhausted.

When I have asked effective decision-makers how they overcome bad habits, most have said something to the effect of "You just do it." Not very helpful. Huh? But they mean that they develop a mindset about adopting alternative ways to spend that time and energy. They also ask for accountability from others. They might announce to colleagues the change they are making and ask these individuals to "dog" them if they are caught going back to

the old ways. They might ask that the meeting location or time be switched so they are not reminded of the old practice. The one thing they don't do is remind themselves not to practice the bad habit. All that does is remind them of the habit they are attempting to forget. This change takes time and is all about impulse control. Observe the best decision-makers around you and watch how they seem to do this. We all battle these challenges at times.

Be prepared for what can go wrong. – President Dwight Eisenhower said, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” Planning for unexpected challenges enables you to better handle them when they inevitably occur. Gary Klein, Ph.D., author of *The Power of Intuition*, suggests a “pre-mortem.” In other words, imagine all the things that can go wrong with the decision. Generate a list of ways to respond. Then make the decision, but keep this list handy for when things take a twist.

Train yourself to reframe the unexpected – We all confront situations that can throw our emotions and logical thinking into a tailspin. By the time we recover from the shock, we feel exhausted because we expended all our sugar energy “catastrophizing” about what could go wrong. High functioning organizations cope with unexpected events by adapting to circumstances rather than depending on plans and procedures. What sets the best decision-makers apart in times of crisis and uncertainty is not that they eliminate their fear, but how they frame it.

I, for instance, have traveled the nation for three decades presenting seminars. Have I gotten lost in cities, marooned at airports, and locked out of hotel rooms? Oh, baby! Over the years,

I have learned that I must reframe these events before my emotions take over. The way I do this is by repeating a simple mantra, “I love an adventure. I love an adventure.” As absurd as this may sound, I repeat it until my attention shifts from potential disaster to options for recovery. It works so well, my wife and I used it when we became stranded in backcountry Italy a few years ago. This strategy may not be the idea you will embrace. But you must develop a way to reframe unexpected challenges when they occur.

Play strategy-based games to strengthen decision skills – Confident decision-makers make better decisions and expend less energy doing so. A critical reason for this is their comfort taking calculated risks. Any decision of significance involves uncertainty. The more you make these kinds of decisions, the more comfortable you feel in doing so. Playing games accelerates and refines these skills. The repetition of playing these games encourages the brain to expand its intuition. Over time, the confidence you develop will be extrapolated to other decisions you make. It will also add perspective and help you reframe and recover from mistakes and unexpected challenges in general.

It has been my observation that many of these individuals participate in strategy-oriented activities such as chess, poker, or even video games. They also participate in avocations that require strategy development. What hobby can you adopt that will enhance the decision-making in other parts of your life?

Okay, now it is time to once again select a strategy you would like to implement from those mentioned above. Personal routines can be the most difficult to establish if they are overriding a long-

time habit. But it is certainly worth the effort if you substantially reduce your time and energy consumption. As with the others, asking friends or colleagues to hold you accountable as you make this transition is great way to ensure success. So, which one will it be? Once you've decided, ask yourself the three questions:

1. What specific outcome should I expect from implementing this idea? This way, you can compare desired outcome to reality. The best decision-makers are always measuring the results of their time and investment.
2. What steps are necessary for me to implement it? The fewer, the better.
3. How can I best integrate this strategy into my normal routine?

OVERCOMING YOUR OVERWHELM

Have you ever compared yourself to someone else and come out exactly even? It is human nature to compare ourselves to others. In pretty much every case, we come out better than or worse than the other individual, based on an arbitrary set of assumptions.

In many ways, we make daily decisions using the same emotional triggers and beliefs. We've spent considerable time in this book identifying all the micro-decisions that drain our energy and impair our focus. But the time we spend worrying about what other people might think has just as much of an impact.

Older generations remember the phrase “keeping up with the Jones’.” In other words, keeping up with the neighbors. You had to buy a boat if they bought a boat. You had to buy a new car if they bought a new car. Your kids had to attend Ivy League schools if theirs did. Before the digital revolution, these comparisons were

limited to those in the surrounding community. But today, with social media and endless cable programming, we are inundated with these comparisons from around the nation and around the world. (*My Super Sweet Sixteen*, *Rich Bride Poor Bride* and *Crazy Rich Asians* come to mind.)

Exposure to a portion of this madness is unavoidable. Those who conserve their energy, however, find ways to eradicate most of it from their daily lives. That's how they consistently overcome overwhelm. I have cataloged many of these strategies in Chapters 8-11.

There is no specific formula for maintaining your focus in the midst of this onslaught. But if you commit to a well-conceived plan, you'll beat the decision fatigue that defeats those around you. How? Here are the steps I recommend:

1. Complete the self-evaluation on the following pages. Then step back and list the areas where improvement is needed. This DOES NOT need to be a long list. Making it too much of a project will overwhelm your efforts to beat your sense of overwhelm.
2. Use this evaluation as a benchmark for progress over the coming months. Check-in every 30 days or so and see how you're doing. For a printable version, go to www.commonsenseenterprises.net/OOevaluation.
3. Go back through the four chapters of strategies and select ONE from each that you can implement in the coming months. DO

NOT implement them all on the same day. Your brain will hate this and will work to defeat you. Start small. Once you've established one change, try another. If this becomes too much of a burden, stop the second effort and let the first strategy become more of a rhythm. Remember, habits can take as much as 30 days to become fully ingrained.

4. Tell a few trusted colleagues or friends what you're doing and ask them to hold you accountable. Do not announce your efforts to the world. If you do, there will always be that smart-ass who yells, "Hey _____! How's that decision fatigue thing going?" from across the room. You do not need that heartburn.
5. DO NOT put a clock to this process. Beating decision fatigue requires a permanent change in mindset. Celebrating at 30 days, for instance, will do nothing but remind you of what you used to do. This is not productive.
6. Subscribe to my weekly *Decision Secrets* tip series. These one-minute videos will help reinforce your momentum and connect you with other good thinkers. (You can find a subscription link on the same page as the evaluation form.)

The idea for this book was born out of my desire to help those around me effectively battle the decision fatigue that burdens us all at times. Let me know how it worked for you. Send me a comment at bobw@commonsenseenterprises.net.

Thanks for reading.

OVERCOMING YOUR DECISION FATIGUE

Instructions: Are you wondering how to better manage your decision fatigue? Complete this reflection tool to gather some insights. Read each attribute. Then circle the term that best describes your relationship with it. Do this quickly. Obsessing over these choices will just add to your decision fatigue. When you're finished, ask, "What are my 3-5 take-aways from this exercise?"

Extra credit: Repeat this exercise every 30 days for six months and compare your takeaways as you continue to manage this challenge.

I am purposeful in taking time for personal balance and recovery.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I possess well-developed decision management routines.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I maintain effective personal discipline in using social media.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I actively and effectively delegate tasks and responsibilities in the workplace.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I am comfortable saying “no” to requests, tasks and commitments that obstruct my personal and professional goals and objectives.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I gather sufficient details before agreeing to participate in tasks and projects requested by others.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I use an effective process for making significant decisions in both workplace and personal situations.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I effectively manage my daily diet and energy.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I am confident in managing the normal discomfort that comes in response to uncertain, awkward or confrontational situations.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

I possess clearly defined professional and personal priorities and reference them when making significant decisions.

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

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Bob Wendover

Littleton, CO

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BIOGRAPHY

Bob Wendover helps companies improve workplace performance by improving everyday decision-making. His argument is simple: Better thinking produces better outcomes. Bob has conducted more than 1500 keynotes and seminars over the past 30 years. But he's no "sage on the stage." He was conducting interactive keynotes way before the term was in vogue.

Adults learn best when they're interacting. That's the type of session at which Bob has become a master. He's published twelve books and written hundreds of articles. He's appeared on CNN, CNBC and a host of other media outlets. He's written for major newspapers across the US. He has served on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix and as a special advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC).

Bob has spoken everywhere from the towers of Wall Street to the bush of Alaska. He will entertain you. He will inform you. But most important, he will make you think. After all, better thinking results in better decisions and better decisions improve performance.

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