

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 44: How to Avoid Decision Fatigue

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Hello my little Nation. This is Tim Ferriss. Welcome to an in between-isode for the Tim Ferriss show. Quite a many of you have been asking for more in between-isodes and here with follows such an episode. To differentiate it from the normal episodes, which is usually an in-depth interview one to three hours in length, sometimes they are cut up into multiple parts and those have been done with people ranging from Tony Robbins to billionaire, Co-founder/Founder/Investor Peter Teal, all the way to people on the art side like Mike Shinoda of Linkin Park, chess prodigies like Josh Waitzkin etc. etc. I just chewed Josh's name up a bit, but that is okay. You can find all of those up fourhourworkweek.com/podcasts and you can also find them on iTunes of course. But, this in between-isode intended to be a bite size bit amusing, philosophical food for thought or perhaps principles or tactics that you can apply to your own life.

And this in between-isode is going to focus on decision fatigue and avoiding decision fatigue. This episode is brought to you by the Tim Ferriss book club. I read probably two to four books per week. I have read thousands, maybe tens of thousands of books. Who knows? My math is failing me, but The Tim Ferriss book club highlights four to six books and total at this point that have had a huge impact on my life. So, if you go to audible.com/Timsbooks you can see all those books. You can get free samples of all of them and that is audible.com/Timsbooks, so check it out if you are interested.

Now to avoiding decision fatigue, before we get into talking about decision fatigue and some of this did not make it into *The Four Hour Chef*. So, *The Four Hour Chef* is really a book on accelerated learning disguised as a cookbook, which thematically was a little confusing for some people I think, but it is really my guide to accelerated learning and meta learning.

There is the concept of minimum effective dose. This also pops up in *Four Hour Body* and physical training and the idea is you are looking for the fewest variables, the least amount of effort to get your desired result and the objective is not to do as much as possible, but the least is required. And this is a principle that has been applied to Olympic track for example to break many, many world records because human being's biological systems have to recover. There is a finite amount of resources that can be applied to different types of training and so on. That is also true of mental activities like work or skill acquisition whether it be languages, or cooking, or anything else, playing tennis. You have to manage your resources and that is just intelligent use of choosing your input and volume and so on.

So, the minimum effective dose is really borrowed from medicine in effect. That is an easy way to explain it and the idea is let us just say you need antibiotics for some reason.

Well, if you consume too little of the antibiotic, it is ineffective. You cannot accomplish the goal, which is eradicating what you want to say Lyme disease or something like that. If you take just the right amount, the Goldilocks amount, of that antibiotic, the minimum effective dose, you accomplish what you set out to do with minimal side effects and that is what we are aiming for. Of course, if you take too many of these antibiotics are too much of the antibiotics you will suffer from side effects and the side effects in some cases can be as debilitating or more debilitating than the problem you were trying to solve. And that can be applied all of the place. So, if you work too much you exceed the minimum effective dose, you are going to suffer from health side effects from societal or relationship side effects that are very negative.

So, we are always looking for this minimum effective dose the MED and it ties into avoiding decision fatigue. So, in the modern world overrun with digital minutia, it is extremely easy since the amount of information produced on a daily basis outstrips your ability to ever consume it in your lifetime. You are confronted with superfluous decisions all the time and part of being effective, part of being efficient, part of having a life that you love, instead of loath is minimizing unnecessary decisions. So, the MED is basically your entrance fee if you will. If you look at it within the context of say, culinary school, so your first round I really assembling – and we are not going to focus on cooking, so just bear with me as I get through the intro. The first round is really assembling the base of fundamentals required to be world class. So, there are many ways to be world class in the world of cooking, but anyone who is world class shares certain fundamentals.

And this is the alphabet, the ABCs that while simple, can be used to compose anything from nonsensical poems that children are putting together, all the way up to Shakespeare. The ABCs are the same. So, in our case, we want to keep it simple. If, this, then, that, no choices. Choices are not your friend for the most part and we want to have, whenever possible, checklists or if, this, then, that types of rules, algorithms for running our life our lives. So, in the world of cooking, here is a starting point, for each of the following categories I am going to mention there is a spice or herb that will almost never fail you, okay? And this gives you a margin of safety, whether in cooking or investing, where you can make a lot of mistakes as long as you get this one choice right and things will still turn out, not just okay but in some cases spectacularly well.

For instance, fish use fennel or dill. Tomatoes, use basil. Do not use those two together by the way, but basil and dill are flavor enemies, so do not put those together, but fish use fennel or dill. Tomatoes, use basil. Pork, use rosemary. Eggs, use tarragon. Tarragon goes with very little else, but it is miraculous on eggs. So, if you are sick of having eggs on the slow carb diet in the morning, try some tarragon and if you want to get fancy, you can get some white truffle sea salt and those two things will buy you an additional six months of eating scrambled eggs in the morning I kid you not. We are going to then get out of cooking, but the point is we have very simple if, this, then, that rules and we are minimizing choices.

And ensuring quality with one rule for each of these categories. Now, there are biological costs to decision making and I want to encourage anyone interested in this concept to

read a blog post that I wrote quite a while ago on how I manage this in number of capacities. You can just search, choice minimal lifestyle and then my name, Ferriss on Google and you will find it. But, imagine you have 100 points for making decisions every 24 hours. The more decisions you rack up in one area, the few decisions you can effectively make elsewhere. So, if you make a ton of unnecessary decisions, which email to check, what to do first in the morning, what breakfast to have, you are going to defeat your hit points and that will lead to poor decision making later because you are going to run out of your 100 points. You will spend too much money on nonsense. You will grab the cookies at the department store on the way out – or at the grocery store probably instead of ignoring it.

You will opt to postpone commitments and you can consider, for instance, as an example, an experiment performed by researchers, I think it was at Florida State University and this was chronicled in a *New York Times Magazine* piece called Do You Suffer from Decision Fatigue? And it reads as follows, “A nearby department store was holding a going out of business sale, so researchers from the lab went off to fill their car trunks with simple products. When they came to the lab the students were told that they would get to keep one item at the end of the experiment, but first they had to make a series of choices. Would they prefer pen or a candle? A vanilla scented candle or an almond scented one? a candle or a t-shirt? A black t-shirt or a red t-shirt? A control group meanwhile, let us call them the non-deciders, spent an equally long period contemplating all these same products without having to make any choices.

Afterward, all the participants were given one of the classic tests of self-control. Holding your hand in ice water for as long as you can. The impulse to of course pull your hand up. So, self-discipline is needed to keep the hand under water. The deciders gave up much faster. They lasted 28 second less than – that was less than half the 67 second average of the non-deciders. Keeping all those choices – or making all those choices has apparently sapped their willpower and it was not an isolated effect. It confirmed in other experiments testing students after they went through exercises like choosing courses from a college catalog. So, how can you apply this? What is one of the simplest ways that you can apply this? Decide what you are going to do for the first hour of your day. Do not make it something that is up to deciding. What you are going to wear, what you are going to eat, what you are going to read.

Spec out the first hour of your day as if it were a take-off checklist and you were a pilot at an airline. Make it as automated, as braindead, as possible so that anyone if you were to hand them this sheet of paper, a set of instructions in Evernote or whatever, could replicate the first hour of your day perfectly. Really spell it out and follow it for a week. There are a number of people, Steve Jobs among them, who standardized what they wore instance. Men in Black style so they did not have make any decisions. Practice that. consider taking, let us just say, a set of white t-shirts and one set of jeans for a week to minimize just that decisions, which gives you an extra one or two hit points for the day. Which should allow you to not only make better decisions, but also exert self-control when it comes to not doing things. This is something that is not really discussed at length in my experience in literature and that is not just making bad decisions that we want to

avoid, it is doing things or making decisions about things where decisions should not be made at all.

Things that are not worth your time and famously as Peter Drucker, the management theorist said, there is no greater waste of energy or resources in doing well that which should not be done at all. It could have been Seneca; it could have been someone else. I think it was in this case Drucker. Now, pulling form a number of different articles. I am also going to elaborate here, so decision fatigue helps explain why ordinary, sensible people get angry at colleagues and families splurge on clothes, by junk food at the super market, and cannot resist the dealer's offer to rust proof their new car and I believe this is actually from the same *New York Times Magazine* piece. No matter how rationale and high minded you try to be, you cannot make decision after decision without paying a biological price and I bolded this. I grabbed it and pulled it offline into Evernote. I also use Scrivener for this kind of thing.

But, let me reiterate this, no matter how rationale and high minded you try to be and let us change that – no matter how rationale or intelligent or high minded you are, you cannot make decision after decision without paying a biological price and there is a consequence to that price. It is different from ordinary physical fatigue. You are not consciously aware of being tired, but you are low on mental energy. The more choices you make throughout the day, the harder each one becomes for your brain and eventually it looks for shortcuts, usually in one of two very different ways. The first shortcut is to become reckless. To act impulsively instead of extending the energy to think first through the consequences. Sure, tweet that photo. What could go wrong? The other short cut is the ultimate energy saver and that is doing nothing. Instead of agonizing over decisions, avoid any choice and a good example of that is actually the table that I am sitting at right now. There is stacks of paper all of the place. This is a bad habit of mine. I have hyper agraphia. I take a ton of notes.

The stacks of business cards and what not have been just sitting here and I have [inaudible] these are all extensively important things and rather than make decisions about what should be scanned, what should be sorted, what should be thrown out, what should be somehow conveyed to you guys, my readers for instance because I think it is valuable, I just opt to do nothing. Everything just sits there and typically it is because I go about my day, I do many different things, I spend 99 hit points. I come home and this is what I see on one side of the counter and this table, all these stacks of paper. I opt to do nothing. Alright, now back to this excerpt. Ducking a decision often creates bigger problems in the long run, but for the moment it eases the mental strain. You start to resist any change, a potentially risky move, like releasing a prisoner who might commit a crime. So, the fatigued judge on a parole board takes the easy way out and the prisoner keeps doing time.

Alright, I am going to add a caveat of my own here, which is you should not take into account or you shouldn't not believe that making decisions is always better than not making decisions. There are areas, but this is also related to creating a choice minimal lifestyle where you automate decisions so that you make decisions in your better interest.

You do not sabotage yourself. One of those areas is in finances for instance. And I think it was Warren Buffet – it might have been Charlie Monger, his partner, who said do not just do something. Stand there. Which is of course in contrast to the usual expression, which is do not just stand there, do something. And their thought was, do not just do something, stand there. Meaning, if you are going – you can die a death of papercuts with investing if you are constantly frittering away your energy by day trading and things of that type. The fees, the costs, the miscalculations will end up killing you often times.

And there are many cases of this and I talk more about this type of finance with Tony Robbins in my interview with him so you can look for that. But, there are ways to automate it. So, full disclosure, I am an investor in the company, but there are companies like Wealth Front which will help you to automate your investing and tax harvesting and so on so that you do not agonize over decisions and then at your lowest point of hit points where you are fatigued, respond in an emotional way. So, in other words, that would be buying high when things are on their way up and then selling low when you freak out when it drops 20 percent, even though you could ride it out for three years and you would be fine if you took that perspective. So, automate, create a set of rules, so that you are able to make decisions in your best interest as consistently as possible and that comes into the dis framework in the *Four Hour Chef* and creating incentives to do that.

But, I do not want to get too off track here. I have had a lot of tea. I am feeling pretty good so I am full on sexy time brain dumping. Hopefully you guys are getting something out of it. The upshot of all of this is for the aspiring student of business, sport, cooking, or any skill. All of this means one thing, control your variables. If you want to be a good scientist, what do you learn? Control your variables. Minimize the variables. If you want as few things in your life to go wrong as possible, create checklists. Automate the first 60 minutes of your day to set the tone, low stress, low decisions making for the rest of your day. So, you can reserve your decision making power, your creativity, for the areas where it actually counts. Not choosing from 100 toothpastes in the grocery store, not deciding which pair of socks to wear, not deciding what you should have for breakfast in the morning, but for the things that actually matter.

Where you can express your unique capabilities. So, that is the secret of success as far as I can tell. The secret to failure is trying to please everyone. One of the secrets to success, if there is one, is not unbound freedom, but selecting the proper constraints. So, thank you for listening. Hopefully this was helpful. Gives you some food for thought and if you would like more in between-isodes like this, if you have suggestions for what you would like to hear on the podcast in any capacity, please let me know on Twitter. [Twitter.com/tferriss](https://twitter.com/tferriss), two R's, two S's, or Facebook. [Facebook.com/timferriss](https://facebook.com/timferriss) all spelled out. Until next time, thank you for listening.