



It's 3:30 on Thursday; you were duty instructor last night, and you are covering for a colleague who has called in ill. The weather isn't great, the group are tired, and you're making little headway into the wind that has picked up. You need to make a call if you are going to be back on time.

How good will your call be?

Studies have shown that a phenomenon called decision-making fatigue will directly impact the quality of the decision you are about to make. For an Outdoor instructor, that can be a safety call, a tactical call, or a pedagogic or leadership call. The theory of decision-making fatigue is premised on the notion of self-control; importantly, our ability to force ourselves to choose to do difficult things when a more accessible and easier option exists.

Decision-making fatigue results when we have overdrawn the limited internal resource that fuels our self-control, self-discipline and decision-making. More challenging decisions make greater demands while easier decisions less, but all make demands on a finite resource. When this resource runs low, we make poorer decisions.

Decision-making fatigue: The theory

Decision-making fatigue draws on psychological notions of ego-depletion (2) and cognitive load (3). We constantly choose between suppressing our basic urges to act on our needs for food and rest, for example, in favour of other activities.

This executive function — weighing up options and managing priorities — we believe is unique to humans and takes place in the prefrontal cortex. Every time we make demands by exercising these executive functions, we use up our internal cognitive resources, and our executive function diminishes. In short, we become less

capable of overcoming our basic desires; consequently, our decision quality suffers.

Many of us recognise that we make 'poor calls' when we're running out of energy. Human factors cause most accidents; understanding how to manage decision-making fatigue is a critical factor. Our decision-making has safety implications, but the evidence is that the impact may be more significant in the less apparent decisions those that are less safety-critical — the judgements about the choice of a teaching strategy or leadership style, for instance. Evidence in other similarly demanding professions suggests we can manage the cognitive resource at the heart of the issue, a point highlighted in recent research of Outdoor instructors.

Decision-making fatigue: Implications for Instructor practice

Given its significance, increasing awareness of decision-making fatigue would seem prudent. It is important to consider:

- > That any time you commit to a decision to deplete that resource highlighted above, you have less to draw on next time.
- > How this drain on resources is proportional to the significance and complexity of the decision.
- > The bit that drains you is not the consideration of options, analysing the problem or the process of in-action reflection; it is the commitment to a particular course of action.
- > We can tolerate short-term depletion of the resource, going into 'overdraft' for critical tasks so big calls are less affected. However, it is decisions perceived as less critical that are prone.

How does decision-making fatigue manifest itself?

The most effective way to manage decision-making fatigue is self-awareness. Telltale signs are:

- > Avoidance or procrastination.
- > Choosing the easiest accessible option may include doing nothing, or it may be the first actionable option that emerged.
- > Selecting options that satisfy the basic demands (satisficing).
- > Applying inappropriate assumptions or priorities.
- > Acting impulsively.

The relationship with the heuristic traps we may recognise in avalanche terrain is inescapable.

The implications

Although decision-making fatigue can affect anyone, Outdoor professionals are especially vulnerable. Instructors working in natural environments with high degrees of autonomy are ripe for decision-making fatigue. They have high levels of responsibility, high degrees of autonomy to make decisions in response to the environment and group demands, and frequently work in isolation. An instructor working in a typical adventure setting has to contend with the vagaries of a 'hyper-dynamic' environment, the demands of the group, and their own abilities.

In addition, it is not just the 'big calls'. We know the resource is 'ringfenced' for these. It's the multiple smaller-scale demands that have a cumulative effect: incremental losses. It is the numerous small calls that have the most significant impact. Karabiners not done up, waist ties on buoyancy aids not checked, are possible signs of decision-making fatigue.

How can we manage decision-making fatigue?

We see in good decision-makers that they actively manage the resource by using a range of strategies. They aren't tougher or

have greater strength of character; they manage the resource by minimising demands on it via a range of proactive coping strategies (4). These strategies develop over time and have several elements: internal control, planning, reflection, self-regulation and social support (5).

In practice, the single best way to reduce the decision-making load is planning and habituating aspects of the decision-making, minimising demands by creating checklists and generating good habits — because habits make no demands on the resource.

Notably, they don't routinise all their practices because the environment and groups continually make demands that constantly vary. The checklist plans and habits free resources for use when it counts. Frequently we relate our professionalism to our capacities to make good calls under pressure.

We can also form appropriate habits that underpin our practice, enabling us to have resources to utilise under pressure.

We see that instructors who demonstrate good proactive coping strategies can cope with the varied demands of the environment and group, showing initiative and professional agility. Moreover, instructors who exercise proactive coping strategies also accept responsibility more quickly because they appear to operate cognitively and practically.



MANAGING THE LOAD

If you want to read more about decision-making, this article by Loel Collins and Dave Collins is worth a read:

Managing the cognitive loads associated with judgement and decision-making in a group of adventure sports coaches published by JAEOL.

Click here for details.

FIND MAGIC

To reflect on outdoor magic moments and changing trends in childhood play go to page 33.