

Under pressure: The impact of stress on decision making

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We are faced with making decisions all the time. Often, we carefully deliberate the pros and cons of our choices, taking into consideration past experiences in similar situations before making a final decision. However, a new study suggests that cognitive stress, such as distraction, can influence this balanced, logical approach to decision making.

Psychologists Jane Raymond and Jennifer L. O'Brien of Bangor University in the United Kingdom wanted to investigate how cognitive stress affects rational [decision making](#). In this study, participants played a simple gambling game in which they earned money by deciding between stimuli--in this case, two pictures of different faces. Once their selection was made, it was immediately clear if they had won, lost, or broken even. Each face was always associated with the same outcome throughout this task. In the next stage of the experiment, the volunteers were shown each face individually and had to indicate whether they had seen those faces before. Sometimes volunteers were distracted during this task while other times they were not.

The results, reported in the current issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that distractions significantly impact decision making. When volunteers were not distracted, they tended to excel at recognizing faces that had been highly predictive of either winning or losing outcomes. However, when they were distracted, they only recognized faces that had been associated with winning.

The authors note that when we are stressed and need to make a decision, we are "more likely to bear in mind things that have been rewarding and to overlook information predicting negative outcomes." In other words, these findings indicate that irrational biases, which favor previous rewards, may guide our behavior during times of stress.

Source: Association for [Psychological Science](#) (news : [web](#))

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