

Under Pressure: The Impact of Stress on Decision Making

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(PhysOrg.com) -- We are faced with making decisions all the time. Often, we will carefully deliberate the pros and cons of each item, taking into consideration past experiences with similar situations before making our ultimate choice. 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 Bangor's School of Psychology wanted to investigate how cognitive stress affects rational decision making.

In this study, participants played a simple gambling game in which participants earned money by selecting between two stimuli—in this case, they chose between pictures of two different faces. Once they made their choice, they immediately saw if they won, lost, or broke even. Each face was always associated with the same outcome throughout this task. In the next part of the experiment, the volunteers saw each face individually and had to indicate if they had seen those faces before or not. Some of the volunteers were distracted during this task while others were not.

The results, reported in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that distractions significantly impact [decision making](#). The volunteers who were not distracted tended to excel at recognizing faces that had been highly predictive of either winning or losing outcomes. However, the volunteers

who were distracted 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.

Provided by Bangor University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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