

Subconscious saves the day when hungry brain fails

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Complex decisions should be made subconsciously rather than consciously. This is the conclusion of Dutch researcher Maarten Bos. Hungry brains have difficulty making complicated decisions, but our subconscious functions fine even when hungry. The more intricate a decision seems, the more we should rely on our subconscious. Bos gained his doctorate from the Radboud University Nijmegen on 29 October 2010.

The traditional 'sleep on it' may put paid to any further discussion, but Maarten Bos believes that this is one of the best pieces of advice that you could be given. Not all decisions require a night's [sleep](#); solving puzzles, playing a computer game or reading a newspaper are also possible options. But when complex decisions are to be made, conscious consideration is not the preferred course of action. People should, however, set themselves clear objectives, or the subconscious will not get to work.

'This is truly complex'

Bos asked his subjects to make difficult choices about houses, cars and their professional lives. Some people were told that these were 'truly complex decisions' with various factors to consider and huge consequences. The result: the more the problem was blown up, the worse the conclusions the subjects eventually drew. Except when they used their subconscious: this actually improved their decisions. The

subconscious performs better under pressure.

Distraction

To make sure that the subjects could not consciously consider the dilemmas, Bos distracted them by giving them puzzles to solve. Subjects were therefore not given the opportunity to direct their conscious attention to the decision, which allowed the subconscious to analyse the information.

Hunger

That a night's sleep can help was already known, but many scientists ascribe this to 'a fresh view. Maarten Bos' discoveries, however, prove that it is truly the subconscious that does the work. Another experiment Bos undertook involved hungry subjects. These participants had not eaten for three hours, resulting in their blood sugar levels being low. Some of the subjects were then given a high-sugar soft drink, while others were not. The sugar rush improved the subjects' decision-making performance as compared to those whose blood sugar level was still low. But as soon as subjects were made to draw on their subconscious, the [blood sugar](#) level lost its influence on the results. The subconscious therefore not only works better but also more energy efficiently.

Maarten Bos' research is part of the project undertaken by Vici laureate Ap Dijksterhuis, an expert on the subconscious. The Vici grant is awarded by NWO to excellent senior researchers who have demonstrated that they can successfully develop their own new innovative research line and function as a coach for young researchers.

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