

Why most people follow routines

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Former US president Barack Obama famously had a wardrobe [full of identical suits](#). As a world leader, life presents more than enough big decisions – Obama's reasoning was that it made sense to minimise the complexity of the small decisions.

Artists are often thought of as rather different. Francis Bacon, for example, had a tempestuous personal life, a [notoriously chaotic studio](#),

and a penchant for late nights at London's seedier drinking clubs. Yet even Bacon's working habits were surprisingly regular – usually starting work at first light with strong tea, before heading out around midday for his first glass of champagne.

We all have different experiences of the value of [routine](#). For the vast majority of us, routine helps us cope with the continual flow of decisions that face us in everyday life. But when taken to excess, routine can be a prison – especially for some people. But why is that and how do you strike a good balance?

One reason why decision-making is so difficult in the first place is that most of us are extremely bad decision makers. The truth is that we often have only the thinnest grasp of what we actually want, meaning even the simplest decisions can leave us perplexed.

Lab decisions

This is all too evident when we are put in "lab conditions". Psychologists and behavioural economists often try to explore how people make decisions by stripping the problem down to the simplest form. Rather than asking people to make decisions – ranging from the choice of breakfast to achieving career goals – experiments often focus on decisions involving simple quantities: money and risk.

So, in a typical study, an experimental participant might be asked whether she would like to have a certain US\$4, or a 50-50 chance of receiving either US\$10 or nothing at all. Even these simple decisions turn out to be amazingly difficult. In an experiment using gambles – whether played with real money or not – it is sometimes useful to give people each choice twice, to get a sense of how consistent their choices are.

Of course, if two identical choices are presented one after the other, then people will typically be consistent. But if people are given 50 problems twice in a random order – so that they have 100 problems in total – then they'll most likely treat each new problem afresh.

So, according to such studies, how consistent are we? It turns out we are shockingly inconsistent. In fact, on 20-30% of these problems, [people tend to give the opposite answer](#) on the two versions of the very same question. It's also incredibly hard work to make the decisions – people typically leave the lab feeling drained.

This explains how routine provides a natural solution. Rather than having to decide how to live each moment afresh, we can navigate our lives using a simple strategy: (a) other things being equal, choose whatever we chose before, and (b) organise our lives in such a way that we are faced with the same choices, over and over again.



Francis Bacon's Kensington studio, now recreated in Dublin. Credit: wikipedia

This is the wonder of routine! We get up at the same time each morning, eat the same things for breakfast, set off for the same workplace by the same means of transport, meet the same colleagues and engage in roughly the same tasks. Ultimately, it does help lighten the load of continual decision-making.

Dark side

But there is a dark side to routine. Too much routine could presumably

make us locked into rigid patterns of thinking and behaviour from which there will be no escape. Indeed, some clinical disorders seem to have exactly this character: people with [obsessive compulsive disorder](#), for example, may find themselves continually checking doors, washing their hands, or cleaning and tidying. But mostly there is an opposing psychological force that successfully breaks us out of such loops: too much routine becomes crushingly boring.

Most of us are happy to eat the same or a restricted range of breakfasts – saving our cognitive resources to face the decision-making challenges of the day. Yet few of us would be happy to consume the very same evening meal, once the day's challenges are over.

As in so many aspects of life, we need to strike a balance between routine and variety, which may depend on a range of personality and social factors: the comfortable balance point will [differ from one person to the next](#). Some of us may be in danger of narrowing our exploration of the world by inflexibly sticking with our habits, others may reject routine of all kinds, but then struggle with the resulting chaos.

We may also overstate how much variety we want. In a classic experiment asking participants to plan food consumption for the next week, people typically took a variety-seeking strategy – selecting a different flavoured yoghurt each day. But if they had to make each [decision](#) day to day, they tended to [choose the same](#) – presumably the favourite.

This study also illustrates why some of us may be more keen on routine than others. The researchers looked at participants' socioeconomic variables and discovered that people who feel "economically stuck" – with little control over their lives – tend to seek out more variety. The authors hypothesise that variety seeking in yoghurt choice may therefore be an attempt to compensate for lack of control and choice elsewhere.

More broadly, this would suggest that if we feel in control of our lives, routine will be less oppressive. Indeed, where routine is not freely chosen, but feels as if it is imposed on us by circumstances, we may long to break out, whether we are able to do so or not.

Yet, of course, every life is a mixture of repetition and novelty. Having an aversion to routine of all kinds would make no more sense than having an aversion to breathing – routine is something we simply can't live without. In reality, it may be more important to decide which aspects of our lives to routinise, rather than striking a perfect overall balance between routine and variety.

Here, we may learn something from Obama – focusing our mental resources on things we really care about while relying on routine for the rest. In this way, routine can, perhaps paradoxically, be a route to a more interesting and varied life.

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