

Deciding for others is more fun than doing it for ourselves, research shows

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Making decisions can be tiring, but choosing a course of action for others is less draining and more enjoyable than when we do it for ourselves.

That's the finding of new research from Evan Polman, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Wisconsin School of Business, and Kathleen Vohs of the University of Minnesota. The work follows up on previous research by Polman that found people are more creative when solving other people's problems than when tackling their own.

"When we make decisions for ourselves, we have to live with the consequences so we spend a fair amount of time and energy thinking about all the possible outcomes," Polman says. "Making decisions for others takes away that decision stress and makes the process more freeing and fun."

One example is making decisions in dating.

"Think of how you might encourage a friend to go out on a blind date because you focus on all the possible positive outcomes and how exciting it might be," Polman says. "But if you're making that same decision for yourself, you are more likely to worry about being stuck with nothing to say, having an awful time, or meeting a boring person."

Past research had studied the idea of "decision fatigue," how making decisions can deplete self-control resources and leave people less able to make good decisions. Previous studies in this area found that parole judges and doctors made better decisions at the beginning of the work day than the end. It also revealed that consumers buying a car chose more default options at the end of the purchasing process than the beginning, suggesting that, after making many decisions, people were worn down and began to rely on decision shortcuts.

Polman and his co-author sought to replicate past work on decision fatigue and test what makes decision-making more or less draining, focusing on decisions made for others as opposed to oneself. In one experiment, 450 adults took part in an online survey where they were asked to consider 10 situations and asked to make choices. They were randomly assigned to one of four groups:

- a group where they made choices for themselves in the scenarios;
- a group where they made choices for someone else in the scenarios;
- a non-choice group where they were given the scenarios and asked how hard it would be to make the decision for themselves; and
- a non-choice group where they were given the scenarios and asked how hard it would be to make the decision for someone else.

Choosing for others was found to be more enjoyable and less depleting than decisions made for the self. In his earlier research on decision-making, Polman found that people think on behalf of others in a more abstract, open-ended way and can be more creative. Similarly, when making choices for others, people seem to be in a more positive and open mode, resulting in less of the stress than can lead to decision fatigue.

"Making decisions for others led to more enjoyment of the [decision](#)-making process and that led to better self-control," Polman says. "Our findings suggest that for some people facing difficult choices, it might help to imagine their own choices as belonging to someone else and deciding on the basis of what that other person should do."

More information: E. Polman et al. Decision Fatigue, Choosing for Others, and Self-Construal, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550616639648](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550616639648)

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