

Self-control and choices: Why we take the easy path after exerting ourselves

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After a rough day at the office, you might opt for a convenient, pretty restaurant over one with a top-notch menu, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"If you've had a tough day at work, how will that affect the decisions you make, like where to eat, what to do, and what to buy?" ask authors Echo Wen Wan (University of Hong Kong) and Nidhi Agrawal (Northwestern University). Their research revealed that people who are tired from a demanding task will tend to pass up the most desirable choices and go for options that seem to have attractive low-level features.

"After a depleting task people were more likely to pass up the option that was most desirable, widest in scope, and best in primary traits and instead chose the option with lower-level features," the authors write.

For example, the authors predict that after a difficult flight, a consumer would most likely choose a restaurant with a great view over one with excellent food. And someone who just finished a big presentation would opt for a convenient concert over one by a favorite band. They discovered that participants who felt depleted after completing a self-control task chose easy jobs over interesting ones and weekly calendars over months ones—demonstrating a preference for short-term value.

"When we feel fresh it's relatively easy for us to focus on the primary features of a product, consider the outcome of a choice, and value the long-term benefits of an action," the authors explain. "However when we

feel depleted from exerting self-control, we start to attend to the non-central minor aspects, think about how feasible it is to engage in the [choice](#), and sometimes emphasize short-term rewards."

The authors also found they could prompt participants to think at higher levels. In one experiment, depleted individuals chose an art exhibit that was convenient. But when they were primed to think at a higher level, they chose the exhibit by an artist they liked.

More information: Echo Wen Wan and Nidhi Agrawal. "Carry-Over Effects of Self-Control on Decision-Making: A Construal Level Perspective." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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