

Research shows that busy people make healthier choices

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Busyness is often thought of as a modern day affliction, but it can also help you delay gratification and make decisions that provide benefits over the long term, according to new research from the global business

school INSEAD.

"Every day, we make many decisions that involve choosing between our immediate and future well-being. For instance, do we go to the gym after work, or do we just go home to relax in front of the television? Do we save money for retirement, or do we splurge on a trip? Do we eat fruit or cake for dessert? When we perceive ourselves to be busy, it boosts our self-esteem, tipping the balance in favour of the more virtuous choice," said Amitava Chattopadhyay, professor of marketing at INSEAD.

In a new paper, Chattopadhyay and his co-authors, Monica Wadhwa of Fox School of Business at Temple University, and Jeehye Christine Kim of HKUST, show that the mere self-perception as a busy person, or having what they call a "busy mindset," is a "badge of honor" that can be leveraged to promote better self-control. Their paper, titled "When Busy Is Less Indulging: Impact of a Busy Mindset on Self-Control Behaviors", is forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

This paper shows there can be a flip side to being busy. While people who feel under significant time pressure tend to get anxious and make hedonic decisions, those who simply think of themselves as busy tend to make virtuous choices as a result of their perceived self-importance.

Busyness as a way to boost self-esteem

Across a series of studies, the researchers activated the busy mindset of participants through various means. Sometimes, they exposed them to messaging that subtly suggested that they were busy individuals. In other experiments, they asked participants to write what had been keeping them busy recently.

Participants were then asked to make decisions in self-control domains related to food, exercise or retirement savings, for example. Participants

who had been reminded of their busy lifestyle were consistently more inclined than control participants to make virtuous decisions.

Importantly, the studies proved that a heightened sense of self-importance was the key reason behind the increase in self-control. "When we temporarily dampened the sense of self-importance of participants who otherwise felt busy, the self-control effect vanished," said Chattopadhyay.

Implications for marketing and policymaking

It is common for marketers to use busyness as a campaign concept, as many consumers can relate to it. However, if the advertised product is an indulgent one—such as fast food—the campaign could backfire.

"Busyness appeals should be more effective for products that require people to assert self-control, as would be the case for a gym chain, for example," said Chattopadhyay.

In addition, these findings could find societal applications in the spheres of health promotion or food waste reduction. Policymakers may want to consider ways to activate a busy mindset as a nudge to increase relevant [self-control](#) behaviors in the population.

Provided by INSEAD

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