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Overwhelm Might be Due to Decision Fatigue

The concept of decision fatigue has been widely studied in both the areas of healthcare and financial services, but the popular press hasn't had much to say about how decision fatigue affects those contemplating downsizing.

This is unfortunate because choosing to make a residential change following retirement involves a variety of decisions surrounding possible future healthcare needs, as well as the financial consequences of these decisions.

What is decision fatigue?

Decision fatigue, also referred to by researchers as "ego depletion," is a psychological phenomenon surrounding a person's capacity to make multiple and complex decisions effectively. Essentially, when someone is faced with making multiple decisions in a short span of time they may become overwhelmed. This overwhelm may result in poor decision-making, refusal to make further decisions, or complete abdication of decision-making to others.

"We have all experienced decision fatigue," says Nikki Buckelew, Certified Senior Downsizing Coach and Founder of Seniors Real Estate Institute. "At the end of a long or particularly stressful work day, when you can't decide what to have or where to go for dinner, you're likely experiencing decision fatigue."

While the consequences of selecting a spot for an evening meal may be trivial, the stakes are higher when it comes to selecting a new home or retirement community and what to do with long held personal belongings.

Causes and Signs

Most of us make multiple decisions from the time we wake to the time we fall asleep. Many of those decisions are routine and require little thought. Adding more complex or frequent choices, however, requires more thought and effort which can drain our energy stores. As we deplete our energy and tax our working memory, we begin to feel the effects of decision fatigue.



Stress, illness, disability, grief, and pain can all exacerbate decision fatigue. When our focus is on feeling better, recovering from injury, or managing emotional or physical pain, we simply don't have as much energy to give to decision-making in lower-priority areas.

"There came a point after my husband died that I told my kids to just deal with things. I didn't have it in me to make another decision," said Joan Wilkins. "They found my new apartment and moved my things. I do have a few regrets, but at the end of the day it all had to get done and I simply couldn't do it."

Those experiencing decision fatigue may become tired, short tempered, distracted, anxious, or simply overwhelmed. Some might obsess over seemingly simple tasks, while others may withdraw and become isolated.

Effects

- **Illness:** Depleted mental and emotional stores can lead to decreased immune responses and a higher risk for illness or disease.
- **Decision avoidance and procrastination:** Putting off decisions until deadlines are looming may result in later regrets due to rushed decisions.
- **Increased costs:** Studies show that financial decision making is poorer for those experiencing decision fatigue.

Avoiding Decision Fatigue

1 PLAN AHEAD

Making important decisions early in the process can not only help with decision fatigue, but may result in fewer regrets in the end.

“We encourage people to familiarize themselves with real estate contracts and estimates for moving expenses, as well as any retirement community leases, before trying to tackle space planning or other downsizing tasks,” says Buckelew. “Legal documents are complex and require a clear head to fully understand their implications.”



2 TAKE BREAKS

Create a schedule and if decision fatigue begins to set in, take a break. Sometimes a short break will do, although a day or two to rest and restore mental energy may be necessary. A mistake people often make is trying to deal with too many rooms or spaces in one setting. Powering through isn't always the best strategy and instead, it may be better to bite off small chunks over longer periods of time.



3 RECRUIT SUPPORT

Whether it's a trusted family member, friend, or move management professional, relying on those more experienced with downsizing can be helpful.

“It's not that people aren't capable. In most situations they are perfectly capable of managing things,” says Buckelew. “The moving process, however, especially having lived in the same place for decades, is complex and taxes emotional, physical, and cognitive reserves. A little help is a good thing no matter your age. When the helpers have experience, that's even better.”



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Karena Stipp MA, Realtor, CSHP, SRES
919-473-3676 Karenastipprealtor@gmail.com
Real Broker, LLC
Certified Senior Housing Professional
Seniors Real Estate Specialist