

52 Decisions You Never Have to Make Again

A Quick-Reference Guide to Lock, Default, and Automate Your Way Out of Decision Fatigue

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Introduction

Every decision you make costs something. Not much—maybe a few seconds, a small slice of focus. But they add up. By noon, you've made hundreds of choices that didn't matter, and you're wondering why you feel tired.

This book doesn't ask you to care more about your decisions. It asks you to make fewer of them.

Three ways to kill a recurring decision:

Lock it. Some decisions don't need to be made weekly or daily—they need to be made once. What time you wake up. What you eat for breakfast. Which gym you go to. Make the choice, commit to it for 90 days minimum, and stop reopening the case.

Default it. Not everything can be locked, but almost everything can have a default. A default is what you do when you don't have a strong reason to do otherwise. Your default lunch is a salad. Your default response to a meeting invite is no. Your default Friday night is home. Defaults aren't rules—they're tiebreakers. They only fire when you don't care enough to override them.

Automate it. Some decisions can be removed entirely through systems: autopay, subscriptions, scheduled orders, recurring calendar blocks. If a decision can be made by a computer or a calendar, it shouldn't be made by you.

That's it. No philosophy about willpower, no science of glucose depletion, no framework you need to internalize before you can act. Just 52 decisions that most people make repeatedly, each with a concrete way to stop making them.

How to use this book:

Don't read it straight through. Skim the table of contents. Find a decision that's been costing you. Read the entry. Implement it or ignore it. Move on.

Some of these will feel obvious. Good—that means you already solved them. Some will feel too rigid. Fine—skip them or adapt them. This isn't a system you adopt wholesale. It's a parts bin. Take what works.

One thing to avoid: don't try to lock, default, or automate everything at once. Pick two or three that have been actively annoying you. Solve those. Live with the solutions for a few weeks. Then come back and pick a few more.

The goal isn't to optimize your life into a frictionless routine. The goal is to stop spending your limited daily attention on problems you already know the answer to.

1. Morning

What time to wake up

Pick a time. Set one alarm. No backups, no "just in case" alarms five minutes apart. You're not negotiating with yourself at 6 AM—you already decided. Lock it for 90 days, then reassess if needed.

Whether to hit snooze

The answer is no. Snooze doesn't give you rest—it gives you fragmented, low-quality sleep and a groggy start. Put your phone across the room if you need to. The first decision of the day shouldn't be a negotiation.

When to shower

Morning or night—pick one and stick with it. If you exercise in the morning, shower after. If you don't, shower the night before and reclaim 15 minutes of your morning. Stop deciding this daily.

What to wear

You already know what looks good on you. Pick 5–7 combinations that work. Rotate them. Lay out tomorrow's clothes tonight if you want, but stop auditioning outfits for an audience that isn't paying attention.

What to eat for breakfast

Choose two or three breakfasts you like and that keep you functional until lunch. Rotate them or eat the same thing every day—either works. The goal is to stop standing in front of the fridge at 7 AM trying to invent something.

Whether to eat breakfast

Some people don't need it. If you're not hungry until 10 AM, stop forcing yourself to eat at 7. If you crash without it, eat. Make the call once based on how you actually feel, not based on what you think you should do.

When to leave the house

Work backward from when you need to arrive. Add a buffer for traffic or transit variability. That's your departure time. Put it on a recurring calendar reminder if you need to. Stop recalculating this every morning.

2. Food

What to eat for lunch

Set a default lunch. Something reasonably healthy, available near work or easy to pack, and that you don't hate. Eat that unless you have a compelling reason not to. "I'm bored of it" isn't compelling—it's a trap.

What to eat for dinner

Plan your dinners for the week on Sunday. Write them down. Buy the ingredients. When 6 PM hits, you're not deciding—you're executing. If you don't meal plan, default to three or four rotation dinners you can make on autopilot.

Where to eat out

Maintain a short list of restaurants you like—one for each major category (quick casual, date night, family-friendly, delivery). When someone asks "where should we go?", you're not brainstorming. You're consulting a list you already made.

What to order at a restaurant

For places you visit regularly, have a go-to order. Don't study the menu every time. You know what you like there. Order it. Save the menu exploration for new restaurants.

When to go grocery shopping

Same day, same time, every week. Put it on your calendar. Automate the reminder if you need to. Shopping at a consistent time means consistent stock levels and no emergency store runs at 9 PM.

What to buy at the grocery store

Keep a master list of staples. Print it or use a notes app. Check off what you need each week—don't try to remember. For regular items that don't change, set up a recurring delivery or subscription if your store offers it.

Whether to cook or order in

Default to cooking. Make ordering in the exception that requires justification—sick, exhausted, celebrating something. If you're ordering in more than twice a week, you don't have a willpower problem; you have a meal planning problem.

3. Work Initiation

What to work on first

Decide this the night before, not in the morning. Write down the one thing that matters most tomorrow. When you sit down at your desk, you're not choosing—you're starting. Morning brain is for executing, not prioritizing.

When to check email

Not first thing. Set a specific time—after your first focused work block is a good default. Check it at scheduled intervals, not continuously. Every time you check email, you're letting other people set your priorities.

Which tool to open first

Whatever tool contains the work you identified the night before. Not Slack. Not email. Not the news. Open the document, the codebase, the spreadsheet—whatever the actual work lives in. Make it the first thing you see.

How to prioritize your task list

Use the same method every time. Pick one: most important first, hardest first, quickest wins first—whatever works for you. The specific method matters less than using it consistently so you're not reinventing prioritization every morning.

When to take breaks

Set a recurring timer or use time blocks. Work for 50 minutes, break for 10. Or 90 and 15. Or 25 and 5. Pick a rhythm, put it on a timer, and follow it. Don't decide in the moment whether you've "earned" a break.

Whether to attend a meeting

Default to no. Accept meetings only if you're essential, the agenda is clear, and it couldn't be an email. Put the burden of proof on the meeting, not on your decision to skip it. Protect your calendar like it's money—it is.

4. Communication

When to respond to messages

Batch your responses. Check messages at set times—two or three per day is usually enough. Responding immediately trains people to expect instant replies and keeps you in reactive mode. Most things can wait two hours.

How quickly to respond to emails

Within 24 hours for most things, same business day for urgent items. Not immediately. If everything is urgent, nothing is. Let your response time reflect actual importance, not the anxiety of an empty inbox.

Which channel to use

Set personal rules. Quick questions: text or Slack. Needs a record: email. Complex or emotional: call or in-person. Stop deciding this every time you need to reach someone. Match the channel to the type of message, not the recipient's preference.

How long to spend on an email

Most emails should take less than two minutes. If it takes longer, it probably shouldn't be an email. Set a rough time limit and stick to it. Perfecting an email no one will read twice is a waste of your decision-making energy.

Whether to engage in an online debate

No. Default is no. You will not change anyone's mind in a comments section. If you're tempted, close the tab. The cost is always higher than you think, and the reward is always lower. Find something better to do with your attention.

Whether to answer the phone

If it's in your contacts and you're available, yes. If it's unknown, let it go to voicemail. Legitimate callers leave messages. Scammers and salespeople don't. Screen by default; call back if needed.

When to check social media

Set a specific time and duration. Maybe 20 minutes after lunch, or 15 minutes in the evening. Outside that window, the apps shouldn't be open. If you can't trust yourself, use an app blocker. The platforms are designed to steal your attention—design around them.

5. Money

When to pay bills

Autopay everything. If a biller doesn't offer autopay, set a recurring calendar reminder for two days before the due date. You should never be deciding whether to pay a bill—it should just happen without your involvement.

Whether to buy something under \$20

If you need it, buy it. Don't agonize over small purchases—the mental energy you spend costs more than the money. Set a threshold (maybe \$20, maybe \$50) below which you stop deliberating. Above that threshold, apply more scrutiny.

Whether to buy something over \$100

Wait 48 hours. If you still want it and can afford it after two days, buy it. Impulse purchases over \$100 almost never feel as good a week later. The waiting period does the deciding for you.

Which subscriptions to keep

Audit once per quarter. Set a calendar reminder. Cancel anything you haven't used in 30 days. Most subscriptions survive because you forget about them, not because they're valuable. Make forgetting work against the subscription, not for it.

How much to tip

Pick your percentages and lock them. Maybe it's 20% for sit-down, 15% for counter service, \$2 for coffee. Whatever your numbers are, make them automatic. Calculating tip amounts in your head every time is friction you don't need.

What to do with spare change

Use a jar, dump it quarterly, or go cashless. If you use cash, pick one spot for loose coins and empty it on a schedule. Don't let change accumulate in pockets, drawers, and car cup holders. One system, no exceptions.

How much to save each month

Set up automatic transfers on payday. The money should move to savings before you see it in checking. Don't decide each month how much to save—decide once, automate it, and forget about it until your situation changes.

6. Health

When to exercise

Same time, same days, every week. Put it on your calendar like a meeting. Morning works best for most people because there's less chance something will interfere. But any consistent time beats a theoretically optimal time you don't stick to.

What workout to do

Follow a program. Any reputable program. Don't design your own workouts every session—follow a plan someone else made. Show up and do what the plan says. When the program ends, pick another one. Decisions made; just execute.

Whether to exercise today

If it's on the schedule, yes. You don't decide whether to exercise—you already decided when you made the schedule. The only exception is genuine illness or injury. "Not feeling it" isn't an exception; it's a reason the decision was removed from you.

When to go to sleep

Work backward from wake time. If you need 7 hours and wake at 6, you're in bed at 11. Set a reminder 30 minutes before bedtime to start winding down. This is a locked decision—not a nightly negotiation with yourself.

What supplements to take

Consult with a doctor once, then take whatever they recommend at the same time each day. Use a pill organizer if it helps. Don't re-research supplements every few months—set it and forget it until your next checkup.

When to schedule doctor appointments

Book your next appointment at the end of each visit. Annual physical, dentist every six months, whatever you need—schedule it before you leave. Put it on your calendar immediately. Don't rely on yourself to remember to book later.

How much water to drink

Get a water bottle with measurements. Decide how many times to refill it based on your target intake. Refill it at set points in the day—morning, lunch, afternoon. Stop wondering if you've had enough water; the bottle tells you.

7. Evening & Leisure

When to stop working

Set a hard stop time. When it hits, you're done. Close the laptop, leave the office, put the work phone away. Work will expand to fill whatever time you give it. Defend your boundary with a specific time, not a vague intention.

What to watch tonight

Maintain a short list of shows or movies you want to watch. When you sit down, consult the list—don't scroll through streaming catalogs hoping something catches your eye. Scrolling is a decision trap disguised as leisure.

What to do with free time

Keep a list of things you enjoy that you never seem to have time for. When you find yourself with an unexpected hour, consult the list. Don't default to your phone. Your future self already made a list of better options.

Whether to go out or stay in

Default to staying in. Going out should require a specific reason—an event, a plan, a person you want to see. Vague FOMO isn't a reason. If your default is "in," you stop wasting energy on maybes that go nowhere.

What to read next

Keep a running list. When you finish a book, the next one is already chosen. Don't spend 45 minutes browsing recommendations—you added things to your list for a reason. Trust your past self and pick the top item.

Whether to have a drink

Set your own rules in advance. Maybe it's only weekends, or only with dinner, or not at all. The specific rule matters less than having a clear default. In-the-moment decisions about alcohol are rarely your best decisions.

When to put the phone away

One hour before bed. Put it on the charger in another room. If you need an alarm, use a dedicated alarm clock. The phone is designed to keep you engaged—remove it from arm's reach during wind-down time.

8. Commitments

Whether to say yes to a new commitment

Default to no. Give yourself a 24-hour waiting period before accepting anything new. If you still want to say yes after a day, go ahead. Most things feel less exciting after the social pressure of the moment fades.

How to decline an invitation

Keep it simple: "Thanks for the invite, but I can't make it." No elaborate excuses, no detailed justifications. You don't owe anyone an explanation for how you spend your time. Polite and brief gets you out without drama.

Whether to renew a recurring obligation

Apply the "hell yes or no" test. If you're not enthusiastic about continuing, stop. Tepid commitments drain energy without providing proportional value. Default is to let it lapse unless you have a clear reason to continue.

Which charities to support

Pick two or three causes you genuinely care about. Set up monthly recurring donations. When someone asks you to support something else, you already have a giving strategy. Politely decline or add it to a review list for next year.

How to handle gift-giving occasions

Keep a running list of gift ideas for people you regularly buy for. When you hear someone mention wanting something, add it to the list. When an occasion comes, consult the list. No last-minute scrambles, no generic gift cards.

Whether to volunteer for something

Apply the same 24-hour rule as other commitments. Check your calendar before saying yes—actually look at it, don't guess. If it conflicts with existing priorities or rest time, the answer is no regardless of how good the cause sounds.

When to revisit your commitments

Once per quarter. Put it on your calendar. Review everything you've said yes to—memberships, obligations, recurring tasks. Anything that no longer serves you gets cut. Don't wait until you're overwhelmed to prune.

What Now

You just read 52 decisions you could stop making. You're not going to implement all of them. You shouldn't try.

Pick two or three that resonated—the ones where you thought "yeah, that one's been annoying me." Implement those this week. Lock the decision, set the default, or put the automation in place.

Live with it for a few weeks. See if it sticks. If it does, come back and pick a few more.

The goal isn't to turn your life into a rigid script. It's to stop spending mental energy on problems you've already solved. Every decision you remove is attention you get to spend on something that actually matters.

Start small. Lock something tonight. See how it feels tomorrow.

About the Author

Matt Livingston writes practical guides for people who are tired of productivity advice that doesn't survive contact with reality. He lives in Texas and builds things at MattLivingston.com.

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