

Decision Fatigue Is a Design Problem

Stop paying cognitive rent on decisions that shouldn't exist

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What This Book Is Not

This is not a productivity system.

This is not about making better decisions.

This is not about discipline, willpower, or waking up earlier.

If you want a morning routine that requires you to be a different person than you currently are, this isn't it.

This book is about removing decisions from your life so you stop bleeding cognitive capacity on choices that never needed to exist.

The premise is simple: most of what exhausts you isn't the hard decisions. It's the trivial, recurring ones—the ones you make over and over without ever really resolving them. What to eat. What to wear. When to start working. Whether to respond to that message now or later. These decisions seem small. They're not. They accumulate. And they're draining you in ways you've probably stopped noticing.

The fix isn't to make these decisions faster or better. It's to stop making them at all.

This book will show you how to identify which decisions are costing you the most, and then give you specific strategies for eliminating them—not optimizing them, not managing them, but removing them from your life entirely.

It's short. It's practical. You can read it in an hour and start applying it today.

Let's begin.

The Problem Isn't You

It's 4pm. You've been productive all day. Real work got done. And now you're standing in front of the refrigerator, unable to decide what to eat.

Or maybe it's the end of the workday and someone asks you a simple question—what do you want for dinner, which movie should we watch, do you want to go out or stay in—and you feel a wave of something that isn't quite exhaustion but isn't quite irritation either. It's both. You just don't want to decide anything else.

This isn't a character flaw. It's not a lack of discipline. It's not evidence that you need to get your life together.

It's decision fatigue. And the conventional explanation for it is wrong.

The conventional story goes like this: you have a limited pool of willpower, and each decision you make drains it. By the end of the day, the pool is empty, and that's why you can't choose between pizza and Thai food. The solution, supposedly, is to conserve willpower by making important decisions early and trivial ones on autopilot.

This explanation isn't entirely wrong, but it misses the point. It treats decision fatigue as an inevitability to be managed rather than a symptom of something fixable.

Here's the reframe: **You're not bad at deciding. You're paying cognitive rent on decisions that shouldn't exist.**

Every recurring decision is a design failure. If you're making the same decision repeatedly—what to eat, what to wear, when to start working, which task to tackle first—something upstream is broken. The decision keeps appearing because it was never actually resolved.

Think of decisions like open browser tabs. Each one consumes resources whether you're actively using it or not. They sit there in the background, taking up memory, slowing everything down. You don't even notice the drag until you have too many open and the whole system starts lagging.

The goal isn't to manage the tabs better. It's to close the ones that shouldn't be open in the first place.

Most advice on decision fatigue focuses on making decisions faster or earlier or with less friction. That's tab management. This book is about closing tabs—eliminating decisions that don't need to exist so you stop paying rent on them.

This requires a different mindset. Instead of asking "how can I make this decision easier?" you ask "does this decision need to exist at all?" Often the answer is no. The decision exists not because it's necessary, but because you never stopped to question whether it should.

Once you see decisions this way—as recurring costs that can be eliminated rather than facts of life that must be endured—everything changes. You stop seeing exhaustion as the price of a busy life and start seeing it as a design problem with a design solution.

Decision fatigue isn't a symptom of a busy life. It's a symptom of a life that hasn't been designed.

Where the Load Actually Comes From

Most people dramatically underestimate how many decisions they make each day. Various studies throw around numbers like 35,000 decisions per day, which is probably inflated but directionally correct. The real number doesn't matter. What matters is that you're not counting most of them.

The decisions you notice—the big ones, the hard ones, the ones you deliberate over—are the tip of the iceberg. The ones draining you are the invisible ones. The small, repeated, unconsidered choices that slip by without conscious awareness but still extract their toll.

There are four categories of hidden decision load:

Micro-Decisions

These are the trivial choices that seem too small to matter: what to wear, what to eat, when to start working, which task to do first, whether to respond to that email now or later. Individually, each one costs almost nothing. Collectively, they're death by a thousand cuts.

The problem with micro-decisions isn't their difficulty. It's their frequency. You're not making one decision about what to eat—you're making three or four every single day. Multiply that by every other micro-decision domain in your life and you've burned significant capacity before you get to anything that actually matters.

Micro-decisions also tend to cluster at transitions: the moment between waking and starting your day, the shift from one task to another, the end of work and the beginning of evening. These transition points are already cognitively expensive—your brain is context-switching—and loading them up with additional decisions makes them worse.

The irony is that micro-decisions often feel like they're not worth addressing. "It only takes a second to decide what to eat." True. But that second, repeated thousands of times across hundreds of domains, adds up to a significant drain. The decisions that seem too small to matter are often the ones costing you the most—precisely because you're making them so often without noticing.

Re-Decisions

A re-decision is a choice you've already made that somehow didn't stick. You decided to go to the gym in the morning, but every morning you find yourself re-deciding. You decided to check email twice a day, but the decision keeps reopening. You decided to eat healthier, but every meal is a new negotiation.

Re-decisions are insidious because they feel like failures of discipline. But they're usually failures of implementation. The decision was made but never installed into a system that would hold it. There's no structure keeping it in place, so it drifts back to open status.

The telltale sign of a re-decision: you've "decided" the same thing multiple times. You've told yourself you'd wake up earlier, but the decision doesn't survive contact with the alarm clock. You've committed to a writing habit, but every day is a new negotiation about whether today is the day. These are decisions in name only—they're actually recurring open questions.

Re-decisions often masquerade as goals or intentions. "I want to exercise more" isn't a decision—it's a wish. "I exercise Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 6am" is a decision. The difference is specificity. Vague intentions require constant reinterpretation. Specific commitments can be executed without deliberation.

Phantom Decisions

Phantom decisions are options you're keeping open "just in case" that tax you even when dormant. The project you might start. The side business you're thinking about. The gym membership you're not using but haven't cancelled because you might go. The open invitation you haven't responded to.

These aren't active decisions, but they're not closed either. They sit in a liminal state, demanding occasional attention, requiring you to re-evaluate whether now is the time to act. Each one is an open loop, and open loops consume resources even when you're not thinking about them directly.

Inherited Decisions

Inherited decisions are defaults you never chose but are now maintaining. The way your desk is arranged. The route you take to work. The subscription you signed up for three years ago. The workflow someone else established that you've never questioned.

These aren't necessarily bad decisions. But they're decisions you're paying for nonetheless. Every time you encounter friction from an inherited default, you face a micro-choice: accept the friction or change the default. Usually you accept the friction because changing seems like more work. So you keep paying.

Inherited decisions are especially sneaky because they feel like facts rather than choices. "This is how we've always done it" doesn't register as a decision—it registers as reality. But someone, at some point, made that choice. And you're the one maintaining it now.

The key insight is this: the problem isn't the big decisions. It's the cumulative weight of small, recurring ones that erodes your capacity before you get to anything that matters.

Every open option is borrowed against your future capacity. Call it decision debt. Like financial debt, it compounds. Like financial debt, you don't notice how much you're paying until you try to do something else and realize the funds aren't there.

The Hidden Cost of Optionality

We've been taught that options are valuable. Keep your options open. Don't close doors. Maintain flexibility. This is sensible advice in some contexts—career pivots, major investments, irreversible commitments. But it's terrible advice for daily life.

Every option you keep open is a decision you haven't made. And unmade decisions don't sit quietly in a drawer waiting to be resolved. They run in the background, consuming resources, demanding periodic check-ins. "Should I do this now? Is now the right time? What about that other thing I've been considering?"

The gym membership you're not using but haven't cancelled. The half-finished online course. The side project you might get back to. The invitation you haven't responded

to. The career change you're vaguely considering. Each one is an open loop. Each one extracts a toll.

This is the hidden cost of optionality: the options themselves are expensive, even when you don't exercise them. You're paying rent on possibilities you may never use.

The worst offenders are what you might call "someday" projects—things you intend to do eventually but never quite start. Writing that novel. Learning that language. Getting in shape. Starting that business. These aren't bad goals. But as long as they exist in a "someday" state, they're consuming resources. Every time you remember them, you experience a small hit of guilt or anxiety. Every time someone asks about your progress, you have to manage the gap between intention and action.

The counterintuitive move is to close options deliberately. Cancel the membership. Drop the course. Decline the invitation. Say no to the thing you've been "thinking about" for six months. Each closure feels like a loss—you're giving up potential value. But you're also eliminating a recurring cost. The math usually favors closing.

This doesn't mean being reckless or impulsive. It means being honest about what you're actually going to do versus what you're keeping around "just in case." The things you're actually going to do deserve your attention. The things you're not should be released so they stop draining you.

A useful question: *If I had to pay \$50 per month to keep this option open, would I?* You are paying—just not in dollars. If the option isn't worth a modest monthly fee, it's not worth the cognitive rent you're currently paying for it.

Another useful test: if you haven't done anything about it in six months, you're probably not going to. Either commit to doing it in the next two weeks, or close it. The middle ground—perpetual consideration without action—is the most expensive place to be.

Common Decision Domains

Before you start your audit, it helps to know where to look. Most people's decision load clusters in a handful of predictable domains. These aren't the only places decisions hide, but they're where the majority of your cognitive rent is likely going.

Morning Routine

The first hour of your day is often the most decision-dense. When to wake up. Whether to snooze. What to wear. What to eat. When to leave. Each of these hits you before you've built any momentum, which makes them disproportionately expensive.

Possible lock: "I wake at 6:30, wear the clothes I set out last night, eat oatmeal, and leave at 7:45. No variations on weekdays."

Work Initiation

The transition into work mode is a decision minefield. What to start on. Which tool to open first. Whether to check messages before or after deep work. Whether today is a "real work" day or a "catch up" day. These decisions often masquerade as planning, but they're really just friction.

Possible default: "I start every workday with the same task for the first 90 minutes. Messages wait until 10am."

Food

Three meals a day, seven days a week. That's 21 decision points minimum—often more when you factor in snacks, grocery shopping, and cooking. Food decisions also cascade: deciding to cook triggers decisions about what to make, what ingredients to use, and how to prepare them.

Possible automation: A rotating weekly meal plan with a recurring grocery order for the staples.

Communication

Every message that arrives is a decision: respond now or later, how much to say, which channel to use, whether to engage or ignore. The more channels you have open—email, text, Slack, social media—the more decisions pile up.

Possible default: "Non-urgent messages get a 24-hour response window. I batch all responses at 2pm."

Evening and Leisure

The end of the workday brings its own decisions: when to stop working, what to do with free time, what to watch, whether to go out or stay in. These decisions arrive precisely when your capacity is lowest, which is why so many people default to scrolling or streaming—not because they're lazy, but because choosing anything else costs too much.

Possible lock: "Work ends at 6pm. Monday and Thursday evenings are for [specific activity]. Other evenings are unstructured."

Commitments

Every invitation, request, and opportunity is a decision. Say yes or no. Attend or decline. Help or defer. Without a clear policy, each one requires fresh deliberation—and the social pressure to say yes makes these decisions emotionally expensive as well as cognitively expensive.

Possible default: "My default answer is no. I override only when something creates genuine enthusiasm, not just obligation."

Money and Shopping

Every purchase is a decision—and modern life offers endless opportunities to buy things. Should I get this? Is there a better option? Should I wait for a sale? Is this worth the money? The friction isn't just the big purchases; it's the constant low-level evaluation of whether to spend. Add in subscription management, bill timing, and the choice paralysis of online shopping with infinite options, and money becomes a significant source of decision load.

Possible automation: Auto-pay all recurring bills. Set a monthly "fun money" budget that doesn't require justification. For common purchases, have a default brand or vendor so you're not comparison shopping every time.

Health and Self-Care

When to exercise. What workout to do. Whether to go to the gym today or rest. When to go to bed. Whether to take that vitamin you keep forgetting. Whether to schedule the doctor's appointment you've been putting off. Health decisions have a unique ability to generate guilt when postponed, which adds emotional weight on top of cognitive weight.

Possible lock: "I exercise Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 6am. The workout is the same each day. No daily decisions about whether or what—just execution."

These domains won't cover every decision in your life, but they'll cover most of them. As you do your audit, use these as a starting checklist. Most of your highest-cost decisions are hiding in one of these eight areas.

The Audit

Before you can eliminate decisions, you need to see them. This section walks you through identifying where your decision load actually comes from.

Step 1: The Decision Log

For two or three days, notice every decision you make. Not just the big ones—every moment you pause to choose. You don't need to write them all down in detail. A simple tally or brief note is enough. The goal isn't to be exhaustive. It's to see the pattern.

What you'll likely find: most of your decisions are repeat performances. The same choices, appearing over and over. What to eat. What to wear. When to start. What to do first. How to respond. Whether to engage or ignore.

You'll also notice decisions you didn't realize you were making. The moment of hesitation before opening an app. The brief deliberation about which route to take. The micro-pause before responding to a message. These are so small and fast that they usually escape awareness, but they're still extracting their toll.

Here's what a partial decision log might look like for a single morning:

7:02am — Alarm went off. Decided to get up vs. snooze. (Got up.)

7:08am — Shower first or coffee first? (Coffee.)

7:15am — What to eat for breakfast. Scrolled through fridge for 2 minutes. (Eggs.)

7:31am — What to wear. Tried two shirts. (Blue one.)

7:45am — Checked phone. Decided whether to respond to text now or later. (Later.)

7:52am — Which route to work. Construction on usual route—take alternate? (Yes.)

8:20am — Arrived at work. Park in usual spot or closer one that opened up? (Closer.)

8:25am — Check email first or start on project? (Email. Regretted it.)

Eight decisions before 8:30am, and this is an incomplete list. Notice how many are repeaters: the breakfast question shows up every day, the "email or real work"

question shows up every day, the clothing question shows up every day. These are your targets.

Step 2: Flag the Repeaters

Once you have a few days of data, go through and circle any decision you've made more than once. These are your targets. If a decision is recurring, it means it was never actually resolved—you just chose in the moment without closing the loop.

For each repeater, ask: *Why am I making this decision again?*

The answers usually fall into one of three categories:

I never actually decided. I just chose in the moment. There was no intention to make this a permanent or semi-permanent resolution. Each occurrence is treated as a fresh choice.

The decision isn't implemented. I made the decision, but there's no system holding it in place. Nothing in my environment enforces or reminds me of the choice, so it keeps reopening.

I'm keeping options open. I don't want to commit because circumstances might change. So I keep revisiting instead of locking in.

Step 3: Identify the Costliest

Not all repeat decisions are equal. Some are trivial. Some are load-bearing. Your goal is to prioritize elimination based on cost, not difficulty.

Criteria for high-cost decisions:

Frequency. Daily decisions cost more than weekly ones. Weekly costs more than monthly. A decision you make three times a day is bleeding you.

Timing. Morning decisions cost more than evening ones. A decision that hits you first thing in the day sets the tone and depletes resources you'll need later.

Friction. Decisions that require mental context-switching—pulling you out of one mode of thinking and into another—cost more than those that don't.

Cascading. Some decisions spawn other decisions. Choosing to cook dinner triggers decisions about what to make, what ingredients to use, how to prepare them. These cascading decisions compound the cost.

Rank your repeaters by these criteria. Start elimination with the highest-cost decisions, not necessarily the easiest ones to fix.

Elimination, Not Optimization

Here's where this approach diverges from every other "reduce decision fatigue" article you've read.

The standard advice is to make decisions easier. Lay out your clothes the night before. Meal prep on Sundays. Use a to-do list. Batch similar tasks together.

This is optimization. It reduces friction, but it doesn't eliminate the decision. You're still deciding what to wear—you're just deciding it at a different time. You're still deciding what to eat—you're just front-loading the choice. The tab is still open. You've just minimized it.

Optimization is seductive because it feels productive. You're doing something. You're being responsible. But you're treating symptoms, not causes. A decision that's been optimized will keep coming back. A decision that's been eliminated is gone.

Think of it this way: optimization is like tidying a room that keeps getting messy. Elimination is like getting rid of the stuff that creates the mess. Both require effort, but only one actually solves the problem.

The approach in this book is different: **delete the decision entirely.**

There are three strategies for elimination:

Strategy 1: Lock It

A locked decision is one you make once, permanently—or for a defined period. You're not choosing each time. You're executing a prior choice.

Examples:

"I wear black jeans and a solid-color shirt to work. That's the decision. It's made."

"I eat the same breakfast every weekday. Weekends are open."

"I check email at 9am and 2pm. Outside those windows, the question doesn't exist."

"I exercise Monday, Wednesday, Friday. There's no daily decision about whether to work out."

A locked decision feels like a constraint on freedom. It's actually freedom from the decision. Every time the choice would have arisen, you're already past it. The tab is closed.

The key to locking is specificity. "I'll eat healthier" isn't a locked decision—it's a vague intention that requires interpretation at every meal. "I eat eggs and toast for breakfast on weekdays" is locked. No interpretation needed. No decision required.

How to Make Locks Stick

Knowing what to lock is only half the problem. The other half is making the lock durable. Here's what helps:

Make it identity-based. "I'm someone who exercises Monday, Wednesday, Friday" is stickier than "I exercise Monday, Wednesday, Friday." The first frames the lock as part of who you are. The second frames it as something you do. Identity is harder to negotiate with.

Remove the physical option. If you've locked "no phone in the bedroom," charge it in another room. If you've locked "no snacking after 8pm," don't keep snacks in the house. Environmental design reinforces the lock so you don't have to rely on willpower to maintain it.

Tell someone. External accountability turns a private intention into a social contract. You don't need an accountability partner or a formal system. Just telling one person—"I'm eating the same lunch every day for the next month"—adds a layer of commitment that makes the lock harder to break.

Give it a trial period. "I'm doing this for 30 days" is easier to commit to than "forever." The trial period reduces the psychological weight of the commitment while still closing the decision for the duration. At the end, you can re-evaluate—but during the trial, the decision is locked.

Case study: A software developer I know ate the same breakfast for eight months straight: two eggs, one slice of toast, black coffee. No variation. When I asked if he got bored, he said boredom wasn't the point. "I don't think about breakfast

anymore. It's not a decision. It's just what happens at 7am." He estimated the lock saved him 5-10 minutes of cumulative decision-making every morning—not because the decision was hard, but because it was one less thing requiring his attention during the most demanding part of his day. The real savings, he said, weren't in time. They were in the mental clarity he had when he sat down to code.

Strategy 2: Automate It

Some decisions can be offloaded to a system, a tool, or a rule. You're not making the decision; something else is making it for you.

Examples:

Recurring grocery orders that auto-ship the same staples every week.

Calendar blocking for recurring tasks so you don't decide when to do them.

Auto-pay for bills so you never decide when or whether to pay them.

Email filters that sort messages so you don't decide where each one goes.

If/then rules: "If it's Tuesday, I work on X project."

Automation isn't about apps and technology—though those help. It's about removing yourself as the bottleneck. Any time you can offload a decision to a rule, a schedule, or a system, you've eliminated it from your cognitive load.

Case study: A freelance designer spent a Saturday afternoon setting up systems she'd been putting off for months: auto-pay for every recurring bill, a weekly grocery delivery with the same 25 items, calendar blocks for invoicing every Friday at 2pm, and email filters that sorted client messages into project-specific folders. Total setup time: about three hours. She described the following week as "weirdly quiet"—not because she had less work, but because she had fewer micro-decisions interrupting her work. "I didn't realize how much bandwidth I was spending on stuff that wasn't even my real job," she said. The upfront investment paid itself back within days.

Strategy 3: Default It

For decisions that can't be locked or automated, establish a default that applies unless actively overridden. You're not eliminating the decision entirely, but you're changing it from an open question to a yes/no on whether to deviate from the default.

Examples:

"My default answer to new commitments is no. I can override it, but no is the starting position."

"My default lunch is the salad. I can choose something else, but I don't have to choose."

"My default response time for non-urgent messages is 24 hours. I can respond faster, but I don't have to decide whether each message is urgent enough to warrant an immediate reply."

"My default weekend plan is nothing. Social events have to be good enough to override that."

Defaults work because they shift the burden of proof. Without a default, you have to justify whatever you choose. With a default, you only have to justify deviation. Most of the time, you won't deviate, and the decision never gets made—it just resolves to the default.

Defaults also reduce decision complexity. Instead of evaluating multiple options, you're making a binary choice: default or not-default. That's cognitively cheaper.

Case study: A project manager changed her default answer to meeting invitations from "yes" to "no." Not a blanket rejection—she still attended meetings that required her presence—but the starting position shifted. Instead of accepting by default and feeling overcommitted, she declined by default and only overrode when a meeting was clearly necessary. The first month was uncomfortable. She worried about seeming uncooperative. But her calendar opened up by about six hours a week, and the meetings she did attend were ones where she actually contributed. "Most meetings weren't about me," she realized. "I was just there because no one had decided I shouldn't be."

When Not to Eliminate

Elimination is a tool, not a religion. Some decisions should stay open. Knowing which ones to protect is as important as knowing which ones to close.

Decisions That Bring Genuine Joy

If choosing your outfit is a creative act you genuinely enjoy, don't lock it. If trying new restaurants is one of your pleasures, don't default to the same lunch every day. The goal is to eliminate decisions that drain you, not decisions that energize you. Pay attention to the difference. Some choices feel like taxes. Others feel like treats. Only eliminate the taxes.

Decisions in Rapidly Changing Contexts

If your life is in flux—new job, new city, new relationship, new health situation—premature locks create friction instead of reducing it. A decision that makes sense today might not make sense in three weeks. During periods of significant change, it's often better to stay flexible and accept the higher decision load temporarily. Lock things down once the dust settles.

Decisions That Affect Others Significantly

Be careful about unilaterally locking or defaulting decisions that involve other people. "My default is no" works fine for optional social invitations. It doesn't work for decisions that affect your partner, your team, or your family without their input. Shared decisions often need to stay open—or at least be locked collaboratively.

Decisions Where You're Still Learning

If you don't yet have enough information to make a good permanent choice, locking is premature optimization. Experiment first. Try different approaches. Gather data. Then, once you know what works, lock it in. A lock based on insufficient experience is just a guess with extra commitment.

The point isn't to eliminate every decision from your life. It's to eliminate the ones that aren't serving you—so you have capacity for the ones that are.

Common Mistakes

People who try this approach tend to make predictable mistakes. Knowing them in advance helps you avoid them.

Locking Too Much Too Fast

The enthusiasm of a new system is dangerous. You read something like this, get excited, and try to lock down fifteen decisions in a weekend. By Wednesday, half of them have failed, and you conclude the whole approach doesn't work.

Start with one or two decisions. Let them stabilize. Add more gradually. A lock that holds is worth ten that don't.

Locking the Wrong Things

Some people lock decisions that should stay flexible and leave open the ones that should be locked. Usually this happens because they focus on what's easy to lock rather than what's expensive to leave open. The goal isn't to lock easy things—it's to eliminate costly decisions. Sometimes the costly ones are harder to lock, but they're worth the effort.

Treating Locks as Moral Commitments

A lock is a tool, not a vow. If a lock isn't working—if it's creating more friction than it eliminates—change it. Some people treat a broken lock as a personal failure and double down instead of adjusting. This is backwards. The lock exists to serve you. If it's not serving you, it's the wrong lock.

Optimizing Instead of Eliminating

Old habits die hard. You'll catch yourself making a decision faster or earlier and thinking you've solved the problem. You haven't. The decision still exists. You've just moved it. Keep asking: can this decision be eliminated entirely, or am I just shuffling it around?

Ignoring the Maintenance Layer

Decisions creep back. Systems decay. If you eliminate a batch of decisions and then stop paying attention, you'll find yourself back at baseline within a few months. The weekly review isn't optional—it's what keeps the system working. Five minutes a week is the price of maintaining your gains.

Going It Alone on Shared Decisions

If you live or work with other people, some of your decisions are shared. Unilaterally locking these creates conflict. "I've decided we're eating the same dinner every Tuesday" doesn't go over well if your partner wasn't consulted. Shared decisions need shared buy-in. Talk to the people affected before you lock.

The Maintenance Layer

Decisions creep back in. New ones appear. Systems decay. The work isn't done once you've eliminated a batch of decisions—you need a maintenance layer to prevent decision debt from re-accumulating.

The Weekly Review

Once a week, spend five minutes asking yourself three questions:

What decisions did I make more than once this week? These are new repeaters. They're candidates for elimination.

What new decisions entered my life? Not all new decisions are problems. But it's worth noticing when your decision load is growing. Do these new decisions need to stay open, or can they be resolved now?

What locked, automated, or defaulted decision is leaking? Systems degrade. A lock you put in place three months ago might be loosening. An automation might be misfiring. A default might no longer fit your life. Catch leaks early.

This isn't a formal ritual. It's a quick check-in. The goal is awareness, not analysis.

The Trigger List

Keep a running list of decisions that are costing you. This can be a note on your phone, a page in a notebook, or a document on your computer. The format doesn't matter.

When you notice yourself making the same decision repeatedly—especially if it's annoying—add it to the list. Don't try to solve it in the moment. Just capture it.

A trigger list might look like this:

- What to eat for lunch (every single day, annoying)
- When to do laundry (keeps getting pushed, then urgent)
- Whether to respond to non-urgent texts immediately
- What to wear when I work from home
- Whether to go to the gym in morning or evening

During your weekly review, look at the list. Pick one item to address. Lock it, automate it, or default it. Then move on.

The trigger list externalizes awareness. You don't have to hold these decisions in your head, wondering when you'll get around to fixing them. They're captured. They'll get addressed. Your brain can let go.

The Quarterly Check

Locked decisions aren't permanent. Once a quarter—or whenever something feels off—review your locks.

Ask: Is this still serving me?

Some locks can be released. Your life has changed, and a decision that made sense six months ago no longer fits. Open it back up, make a new choice, and re-lock if appropriate. The breakfast you locked last year might not work for your schedule this year. The exercise routine might need adjusting. This isn't failure—it's maintenance.

Some locks need tightening. You thought you'd locked something, but you keep finding exceptions and edge cases. Tighten the definition. Make it clearer. Remove the ambiguity that's letting the decision creep back in. If your lock has too many "except when" clauses, it's not really a lock—it's a guideline, and guidelines don't close tabs.

Some locks are working perfectly. Leave them alone. The goal isn't to constantly tinker—it's to ensure your systems are still aligned with your life.

A good quarterly check takes about 15 minutes. List your current locks and defaults. For each one, ask whether it's still working. Make adjustments as needed. Then move on. You're not redesigning your life every quarter—you're just checking that the design still fits.

The First Week

Reading about decision elimination is one thing. Doing it is another. Here's a simple seven-day ramp to get you started:

Days 1-2: Decision log. Just notice. Every time you make a decision—big or small—make a quick mental note or tally. Don't try to fix anything yet. The goal is observation. Keep a note on your phone or a small notebook in your pocket. You don't need to capture every decision perfectly—you're looking for patterns, not completeness.

Day 3: Flag repeaters. Review your log. Circle any decision you made more than once. These are your targets. If a decision appeared on both days, it's definitely a repeater. If you didn't keep a formal log, just list the recurring decisions you can remember—you'll catch more next time. Most people find 10-15 repeaters without trying hard.

Day 4: Rank by cost. Look at your repeaters and rank them by cost: frequency, timing, friction, cascading. Don't overthink this—you probably already know which decisions are the most annoying. Pick your top three—the decisions that are bleeding you the most. Write them down somewhere you'll see them.

Day 5: Eliminate one. Choose the highest-cost decision from your list. Decide whether to lock it, automate it, or default it. Then do it. One decision, closed. If it requires setup (like setting up auto-pay or buying duplicate items to keep at work), do the setup today. If it's a lock, write down exactly what you've locked and tell someone.

Day 6: Eliminate a second. Same process. Pick the next decision on your list. Lock, automate, or default it. Two decisions, closed. You might be tempted to do more. Resist. Two solid eliminations that stick are worth more than five that fall apart by next week.

Day 7: Weekly review. Set up your trigger list—a simple note where you'll capture future decision candidates. Do your first weekly review: What decisions came up repeatedly? What's still open that should be closed? What's working? This review should take about five minutes. Put it on your calendar for the same time each week.

That's it. By the end of the week, you'll have eliminated two recurring decisions and built the foundation for ongoing maintenance. The process compounds from here. Eliminate one or two decisions per week, and within a month you'll have closed 8-10 tabs that were draining you without your noticing.

One warning: you'll be tempted to skip the observation phase and jump straight to elimination. Don't. The decisions you think are costing you the most often aren't. The log reveals what's actually happening, not what you assume is happening. Two days of observation is a small investment that makes everything else more effective.

The Real Payoff

This isn't about productivity.

You might get more done. You probably will. But that's a side effect, not the point.

The real payoff is capacity.

When you stop leaking cognitive resources on decisions that shouldn't exist, you have more available for the things that actually matter:

The decisions that require real thought. The hard choices, the complex tradeoffs, the situations where you need to be fully present and clear-headed. You can't bring your A-game to these if you've already spent your capacity on what to eat for lunch.

The work that demands creativity. Creative work requires cognitive slack—the ability to make unexpected connections, to sit with ambiguity, to explore without knowing where you're going. Decision fatigue destroys slack. Every decision narrows your bandwidth until there's nothing left for exploration.

The people who deserve your attention. You know the feeling: you come home exhausted, and someone you care about wants to connect, and you just... can't. You're not out of love. You're out of capacity. Decision fatigue is stealing from your relationships.

The bad days when everything is harder. Life has hard days. Bad news, illness, grief, stress, setbacks. On those days, you need every bit of capacity you can get. If your normal operating mode is already running at max decision load, you have nothing in reserve. A life designed around decision elimination has margin for the days when you need it.

What Capacity Feels Like

It's hard to describe what you're missing until you get it back. Here's what people notice when they stop hemorrhaging decisions:

The 6pm calm. Instead of arriving home depleted and irritable, you arrive home with something left. Not boundless energy—just enough to be present. Enough to have a real conversation instead of collapsing into the couch.

The easy handoff. When someone asks "what do you want to do?" or "where should we eat?", you can say "I don't know, what do you think?" without resentment. The question doesn't feel like a burden because you're not already maxed out.

The unexpected problem. Something goes wrong—a work crisis, a car issue, a sick kid—and you handle it. Not because you're a better person, but because you have reserves. The crisis gets your attention, not your last scraps of attention.

The longer weekend. Two days off actually feel like two days off, not just recovery time from a week of depletion. You do things you want to do because you have the capacity to want things.

This is what you're buying when you close the tabs. Not productivity. Capacity.

Decision Fatigue and Relationships

Decision fatigue doesn't just affect you. It leaks into your relationships in ways that are easy to miss.

The most obvious symptom: you come home depleted, and your partner or family wants to connect, and you have nothing left to give. Not because you don't care, but because caring requires capacity you've already spent. The people closest to you get your scraps.

But there's a subtler pattern. When you're decision-fatigued, every question feels like a demand. "What do you want for dinner?" becomes an imposition. "Where should we go this weekend?" feels like being asked to solve a problem you don't have the energy for. You get irritable, or you deflect, or you say "I don't care, you decide"—which often reads as disengagement rather than exhaustion.

This creates a bad dynamic. Your partner feels like they're always the one making decisions. You feel like you're always being asked to decide things. Both of you are frustrated, and neither of you is wrong—you're just experiencing the same problem from different angles.

Decision elimination helps here in two ways. First, the obvious one: if you arrive home with more capacity, you can actually engage with the people who matter to you. You can participate in shared decisions without resentment.

Second, and less obvious: you can apply these same strategies to shared decisions. Default restaurants. Rotating meal plans. Pre-agreed weekend structures. These aren't rigid rules that kill spontaneity—they're agreements that eliminate the recurring "what should we do?" negotiation. You can always override them, but you don't have to renegotiate from scratch every time.

The key is collaboration. Unilateral locks on shared decisions create resentment. But if you and your partner identify the decisions that exhaust both of you and design solutions together, you're not just eliminating decisions—you're building something that works for the relationship.

One couple I know has "default Tuesday": every Tuesday, they order from the same Thai place, watch the next episode of whatever show they're in, and go to bed early. No planning required. No negotiation. They can override it if something comes up, but the default is locked. They both say it's become their favorite night of the week—not because Thai food is special, but because the absence of decisions is.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: most of us are operating in a state of chronic decision fatigue and don't realize it. We've normalized the exhaustion. We think it's just how life is—always too many choices, never enough clarity, perpetually depleted by evening.

It's not how life has to be. It's a design failure.

And design failures can be fixed.

Decision fatigue isn't a symptom of a busy life. It's a symptom of a life that hasn't been designed.

You don't fix it by being stronger. You fix it by building an environment where strength isn't required.

Start with one decision. The most expensive one on your list. Lock it, automate it, or default it. Close the tab.

Then do another. And another.

Each one you eliminate is capacity you get back. Each one is cognitive rent you stop paying. Each one is a piece of your life reclaimed from the endless churn of choices that never needed to be made.

Your brain is not the problem. Your environment is.

Design it accordingly.