PART 1

Read the text below and answer questions 1–13.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DECISION FATIGUE

Decision fatigue is the term often used to describe a pattern in which the quality of a person's decisions may deteriorate after they have made many choices. The idea resonates because it fits ordinary experience: after a day of selecting, comparing, and responding, even minor decisions can feel irritating, and people may default to whatever is easiest. Psychologists have linked this tendency to short-term limits in self-control and attention. Both are required for deliberate choice, and both must be shared across tasks, meaning that repeated deciding can feel mentally costly even when the decisions themselves are not objectively difficult. Consequently, decision fatigue has become a popular explanation for why people make impulsive purchases late in the day, postpone administrative tasks, or accept a default option simply to end the burden of deliberation.

The proposed mechanism is not mysterious, but it is demanding. Making a decision typically requires evaluating trade-offs, holding competing information in mind, and inhibiting impulses such as choosing the immediately pleasant option or avoiding discomfort. Each of these activities draws on cognitive control, which is limited in the short term. When the same person is repeatedly asked to judge, compare, and commit, they may begin to conserve effort by relying on shortcuts. This conservation can take several behavioural forms. Some people become more impulsive, choosing quickly to end the unpleasantness of thinking. Others become avoidant, postponing difficult choices or leaving them unresolved. Still others depend more heavily on habits and routines, which reduce the need for active deliberation. Importantly, this shift is not always a moral failure or simple laziness. It can be understood as an adaptive strategy that reduces mental costs when control resources feel taxed.

Early research contributed to the concept's public visibility by offering striking evidence in high-stakes settings. A widely discussed study of parole decisions reported that judges were more likely to grant parole earlier in the day and less likely as sessions progressed. The reported pattern suggested that as decision-making accumulated, judges increasingly selected the default or safer option, which in that institutional context meant denying parole. The significance of this example lay in its implications. If an effect associated with fatigue could influence decisions affecting liberty, then decision fatigue would not be limited to trivial consumer choices; it could shape outcomes in major public institutions. Furthermore, the study seemed to capture a plausible psychological story: when tired of

deciding, people may favour the option that requires the least justification or carries the least perceived responsibility.

However, later debate highlighted why such field findings can be difficult to interpret. In real institutions, time of day is tangled with many factors other than mental depletion. The types of cases scheduled earlier may differ from those scheduled later, and administrative routines can determine which decisions are made when. Hunger, breaks, interruptions, and the length of hearings can also influence attention and judgement, creating patterns that resemble fatigue without being caused by it. Laboratory studies, by contrast, allow tighter control of timing and task design, but they introduce other uncertainties. The size of effects can vary depending on what counts as a “decision,” how long a task lasts, and whether participants care about the outcome. Consequently, many researchers have adopted a nuanced view: decision fatigue may exist, but it is often smaller, more variable, and more dependent on context than early headline findings implied.

Motivation is frequently presented as a key moderator of fatigue effects. People can sometimes maintain high-quality decisions when incentives are present, when stakes are clear, or when they feel accountable for the outcome. This observation has encouraged an important distinction: what looks like depleted capacity may sometimes be reduced willingness to invest effort. In other words, the mind may still be capable of careful thinking, yet less inclined to pay its costs unless the situation demands it. If the task feels meaningless, routine, or unrewarding, people may conserve effort by using defaults and habits. Conversely, when consequences are explicit or evaluation is expected, people may sustain attention longer and resist impulsive shortcuts. This does not eliminate decision fatigue as a concept, but it suggests that “fatigue” sometimes reflects shifting priorities rather than a simple emptying of mental resources.

The modern environment may intensify these dynamics because it generates continual low-level choices. Daily life now contains frequent notifications, menus, comparisons, and small administrative tasks that require repeated responses. These micro-decisions are often trivial individually, but they fragment attention by forcing the mind to switch contexts and reorient repeatedly. Over time, the cumulative demand can create a background sense of mental drain, even when no single task is particularly hard. This helps explain why some people feel exhausted after days dominated by communication, scheduling, and online interaction rather than physical labour. The problem is not merely the number of decisions, but the constant interruption of focus and the persistent need to decide what to attend to next.

Practical strategies therefore aim to reduce unnecessary choices and protect attention, while recognising that simplification has risks. Organisations may use checklists, standard

procedures, and clear decision rights so that employees do not waste effort on repeated minor selections. Individuals may adopt routines, meal planning, or fixed rules of thumb to avoid repeated deliberation about predictable issues. The goal is not to remove choice altogether, but to reserve deliberate thinking for decisions that genuinely matter. Conversely, simplification can be misused. Defaults can help users, but they can also lock people into poor options if they are designed to benefit an organisation rather than the decision-maker. Routines can support stability, but they can also become rigid and prevent flexibility when circumstances change. Overall, the most balanced view is that decision fatigue reflects an interaction between internal state and external structure: after many choices, people often rely more on habits, defaults, or avoidance, but the extent of the effect depends on motivation, context, and how environments are designed.

Questions 1–5

Select the correct answer.

1 What does the opening paragraph suggest about repeated decision-making?

A It becomes difficult only when the choices themselves are objectively complex.
B It can make deliberate choice feel mentally costly because attention and self-control are repeatedly required.
C It mainly causes people to lose the ability to understand available options.
D It affects purchasing decisions but has little influence on administrative tasks.

2 According to the passage, what may happen after a person has made many decisions?

A They become more consistent because habits are replaced by deliberate reasoning.
B They avoid difficult choices only when rewards are low and consequences are minor.
C They may rely more on habits, defaults, or avoidance to conserve mental resources.
D They stop comparing options because they can no longer recognise trade-offs.

3 Why does the passage say early findings involving judges may be difficult to interpret?

A Because time of day is linked to other factors, such as case type and scheduling patterns.
B Because the study showed no pattern once researchers included lunchtime breaks.
C Because judges' decisions are determined mainly by fixed legal rules rather than discretion.
D Because the effect disappears in laboratory tasks that use incentives.

4 What does the passage suggest about the role of motivation?

A It matters only in field studies and not in controlled experiments.
B It is irrelevant once people have made a large number of low-stakes choices.
C It influences decision quality only by increasing the number of options people consider.
D It can reduce apparent fatigue effects when incentives, stakes, or accountability are clear.

5 What does the passage warn about the use of defaults?

A Defaults usually increase cognitive load because they require extra comparison.
B Defaults can lock people into poor options if they are designed to benefit organisations.
C Defaults are ineffective unless they are paired with strict personal discipline.
D Defaults undermine decision quality because they remove all flexibility from routines.

Questions 6–9

Complete the notes below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

How decision fatigue shapes behaviour

- Decision fatigue is linked to limits in self-control and **6** ..... .
- After repeated choices, people may conserve **7** ..... by relying on shortcuts.
- Days dominated by communication, **8** ....., and online interaction can feel exhausting.
- Organisations can reduce repeated minor choices by using **9** ....., standard procedures, and clear decision rights.

Questions 10–13

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

10 The passage states that decision fatigue always causes people to make worse decisions in every situation.

11 The passage suggests that decision fatigue effects may be smaller and more context-dependent than early claims.

12 The passage gives exact numerical limits for how many decisions a person can make per day before quality declines.

13 The passage claims that removing all choices is the best way to prevent decision fatigue.

Answer Key

1. B
2. C
3. A
4. D
5. B
6. attention
7. effort
8. scheduling
9. checklists
10. FALSE
11. TRUE
12. NOT GIVEN
13. FALSE