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There's no such thing as a free lunch, and it goes for your brain, too. Every time you accumulate willpower to do something, it has mental costs. Writer and strategist Sebastian Marshall identifies some of these cognitive expenditures to understand how to get more done while maintaining as much of your mental reserve as possible. What is the mental burden of trying to do something? If it's worth it? What price are you going to pay if you're trying to do something in the world? I think that by figuring out what the usual costs of doing things are, we can cut costs and otherwise structure our lives so that it is easier to achieve our goals. When I sat down to determine cognitive expenditure, I found seven. There may be more. Let's start: Activation Energy - As described in more detail in this post, starting activities seem to take more willpower and other resources than to keep going with it. The required activation energy can be adjusted over time - something in the routine reduces energy activation to do so. Things like poorly defined next steps increases the activation of the energy needed to get started. This is one of the main obstacles for many people in many disciplines - just getting started. G/O Media can get a commissionMario Kart Live: Home CircuitOpportunity Cost - We are all familiar with the total cost of the opportunity. When you do one thing, you don't do something else. You have limited time. But there also seems to be cognitive spending on it - a natural second guess choice by taking one path rather than the other. This is the sort of thing covered by Barry Schwartz in his Paradox of Choice work (there are some erroneous thoughts/omissions in PoC, but it's generally valuable). This is also why basically every significant military job ever said that you don't want to put the enemy in a position where their only way out is through you - Sun Tzu claimed, always leaving a way for the enemy to escape, which divides their attention and options. Hernan Cortez famously burned the boats behind him. When you do something, your mind is subtly aware and anxious about other things you don't do. This is a significant cost. Inertia - Eliezer Yudkovsky wrote that people are adaptive-executive, not fitness maximums. He spoke in terms of large-scale evolution, but this also applies to our day-to-day business. Regardless of the personal adaptations and procedures we've gotten into, we tend to perpetuate. Usually people do not violate these procedures unless a dramatic event occurs. Very few people self-thoroughly and do radical things without external events happening. The difference between activation energy and inertia is that you may want to do something, but it's hard to get started - it's energy While inertia assumes that you will continue to do what you did and pretty much turn off your mind. Break out of requires serious energy and tends to make people uncomfortable. They usually only do this if something else makes them more uncomfortable (or, very rarely, when they get incredibly inspired). Ego/willpower depletion - Wikipedia article about ego depletion is pretty good. Basically, a lot of recent research shows that by doing something that takes significant willpower your battery of willpower gets drained by some, and it becomes increasingly difficult to do other high will necessary tasks. From Wikipedia: In an illustrative experiment to deplete the ego, participants who controlled themselves while trying not to laugh while watching a comedian did worse on later tasks that require self-control compared to participants who don't have to control their laughter while watching the video. I highly recommend you do some reading on the subject if you don't - Roy Baumeister has written some excellent works on it. Neurosis/fear/etc - Almost all people naturally have more risk than getting inclined. This seems to have been chosen for evolutionarily. We also tend to fear a lot more than we should for certain activities - especially those that run the risk of social embarrassment. I never realized how strong these forces were until I tried to break out of them - whenever I got a strong backlash from someone on my letter, it made it much harder to write pieces that I thought would be popular later. The basic things are like writing titles that will make the post spread, or polishing the first paragraph and the last sentence - it's like my mind weighed in against the pro/con side that it would generate criticism and it was... scary not quite the right word, but something like that. Some tasks can legitimately say that neurosis is inducing - meaning that you start getting more neurotic when you ponder and start doing them. Things that are almost guaranteed to generate criticism or risk failure often do so. Anything that risks compromising a person's self-esteem can be neurosis inducing too. Changing hormonal balance - too often ignored costs. Many activities will change your hormonal balance for better or worse. Entering conflict situations can and does increase adrenaline and cortisol and other stress hormones. Then you face the withdrawal of adrenaline and crash later. Of course we are mostly biochemistry, so a significant change in hormonal balance affects a lot of our body - immune system, breathing, digestion, etc. changes in costs for many activities. Maintenance costs from ideas re-emerging in your thoughts Another underestimate the cognitive maintenance costs in your thoughts are from the idea of repetitive, especially when the full cycle is not complete. In Getting Things Done, David Allen talks about how open loops are all that aren't where it should be. They periodically arise in our thoughts, often at the wrong time, consuming thoughts and energy. This is normal if the theme is extremely nice, but if it is not, it can carry you. Completions appear to reduce maintenance costs (though not entirely). An example might be not filling your taxes yet - it arises in your thoughts at random times, to disrupt other thoughts. And it's usually not nice. Taking on any project, initiative, business, or change can generate these maintenance costs from the thought of re-emerging. Conclusion! identified these seven as mental/cognitive expenses to try to do something -Activating EnergyOpportunity costInertiaEgo /willpower depletionNeurosis/fear/etc. Changing hormonal balanceMaintenance costs from the idea of re-emerging in your thoughtsI think we can reduce some of these costs by planning our tasks, living at work, social life and the environment wisely. Other ones are good enough to just be aware so we know when we start to drag or with difficulty. Thoughts about other expenditures, or ways to reduce them, are very welcome. Photo: Naoto Shinkai (Shutterstock)Cognitive tests seem to be very difficult for some people. Over the weekend, President Trump discussed his testing experience during a Fox News interview in which he claimed he aced his grades, though it was very, very difficult. It turns out you can find out for yourself how tough the cognitive tests are. There are a bunch of different assessments professionals use to assess different brain functions, from memory and recall visual/spatial and language skills, and while your best choice for official results is to visit a health care provider, you can test your own abilities online without leaving your couch. So if you're wondering if you can successfully complete the very basic task of selecting an elephant or rhino from the lineup, try your hand at one or more of these tests. The Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA) is an assessment that Trump has reportedly made. It tests memory, attention and recall, among other skills, and it is tested to measure cognitive impairment in adults ages 55-85. The official version of the app is only available to health professionals, but you can download a paper copy or take a short version of the quiz, put together by the BBC. G/O Media May Get CommissionMario Kart Live: Home CircuitIn The Last Days Our Secretary of State Named Fuck the idiot. President... MoreDual N-BackThis game checks your short-term memory and fluid intelligence with tasks that require you to get you conversational letters and visual graphics. Brain Workshop has a free open source version. Wonderlic TestThe Wonderlic is a 12-minute cognitive test for 50 questions, commonly used by employers to evaluate job applications. It measures overall intelligence and ability to solve problems, and you can take the free version online. Executive and memory function testsThe interface on Cognitive Fun is pretty outdated (and you need Adobe Flash, sigh), but you can take a wide range of ratings for attention, perception, memory, executive function and more. This includes the Stroop Test (color reading) and the Erickson flanker test. The quantitative Mind ExperimentThe quantified Mind platform has free test scores of the effects of your daily habits - drinking coffee, skipping breakfast, meditating-on your cognitive abilities. You can sign up for a free account and take tests several times in a few weeks. If you want to go deeper down the rabbit hole of cognitive tests, CogniFit has a long list of assessments-general skills, mental arithmetic and safe driving to name a few-you can pay to take. They're not cheap, so free options can be better if you're just dabbling for fun. Finally, a reminder that you don't have to use cognitive test results to diagnose yourself (or anyone else). Only a qualified health care professional can interpret scores and assess mental health conditions for treatment. These suggestions are purely for your own pleasure. Fun. cognitive test anxiety scale (ctas)

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