

The Mental Strain of Making Do With Less

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The New York Times:

Diets don't just reduce weight, they can reduce mental capacity. In other words, dieting can make you dumber.

Understanding why this is the case can illuminate a range of experiences, including something as far removed from voluntary calorie restriction as the ordeal of outright poverty.

Imagine that you are attending a late-afternoon meeting. Someone brings in a plate of cookies and places them on the other side of the conference table. Ten minutes later you realize you've processed only half of what has been said.

Why? Only half of your mind was in the meeting. The other half was with the cookies: "Should I have one? I worked out yesterday. I deserve it. No, I should be good."

That cookie threatened to strain your waistline. It succeeded in straining your mind.

This can happen even with no cookie in sight. Dieters conjure their own cookies: psychologists find that dieters have spontaneous self-generated cravings at a much higher rate than nondieters. And these cravings are not the dieters' only distraction. Diets force trade-offs: If you eat the cookie, should you skip the appetizer at dinner? But that restaurant looked so good!

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As Prof. Eldar Shafir at Princeton University and I argue in our new book, "Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much" (Times Books), a similar psychology of scarcity operates across these examples but with varying degrees of force. If a cookie can tax our mental resources, imagine how much more psychological impact other forms of scarcity can have.

Take the case of poverty. In a paper published last month in *Science*, with Profs. Anandi Mani at the University of Warwick and Jiaying Zhao at the University of British Columbia, Professor Shafir and I waded into politically charged territory. Some people argue that the poor make terrible choices and do so because they are inherently less capable. But our analysis of scarcity suggests a different perspective: perhaps the poor are just as capable as everyone else. Perhaps the problem is not poor people but the mental strain that poverty imposes on anyone who must endure it.

Read the whole story: [*The New York Times*](#)