

When Silence Became a Coping Strategy: Decision Fatigue and Withdrawal in a High-Functioning College Student

Executive Summary

This case study examines a high-performing college student who gradually withdrew from social and academic engagement without showing classic signs of depression or anxiety. The analysis focuses on decision fatigue as a central mechanism behind the behavior. Through interviews, self-reports, and observational data, the case shows how chronic cognitive overload led to emotional shutdown, reduced communication, and declining well-being. Targeted behavioral and cognitive interventions restored functioning and improved daily regulation.

Background & Context

The subject, referred to as A.M., was a 21-year-old undergraduate enrolled in a competitive honors program. Academic performance remained strong, with grades consistently above average. Outside the classroom, A.M. worked part-time, held leadership roles in two student organizations, and maintained a tightly scheduled routine. Over one semester, peers and instructors noticed a shift. A.M. stopped participating in discussions, avoided meetings, and responded to messages with short delays or not at all. No major life event explained the change.

Problem Identification (The Challenge)

The presenting issue involved persistent withdrawal and reduced communication paired with reported mental exhaustion. A.M. described feeling “mentally full” and increasingly unable to

make even small decisions. Simple choices such as responding to messages or planning meals triggered avoidance. The behavior interfered with relationships and increased stress, despite unchanged academic output. The challenge involved identifying why disengagement appeared alongside high external functioning.

Data Collection & Methods

Data collection included three semi-structured interviews, weekly self-reflection logs, and standardized assessments measuring cognitive load and perceived stress. Observations from academic advisors and peers provided additional context. Ethical safeguards included informed consent and anonymization. The focus remained on subjective experience rather than diagnosis.

Analysis & Evaluation

Patterns across data pointed toward decision fatigue. A.M.'s schedule required constant prioritization, rapid context switching, and high self-monitoring. Cognitive resources appeared depleted by ongoing demands rather than acute distress. Silence functioned as a low-effort coping response that reduced incoming decisions. The withdrawal was not avoidance of people but avoidance of choice. Psychological theory on self-regulation and cognitive depletion supported this interpretation.

Intervention & Proposed Solution

The intervention aimed to reduce decision load rather than increase motivation. Strategies included simplifying daily routines, batching communication into fixed time windows, and limiting leadership responsibilities temporarily. Cognitive reframing addressed the belief that

immediate responsiveness equaled responsibility. Mindfulness techniques focused on early detection of overload rather than emotional processing alone.

Implementation

The plan unfolded over six weeks. A.M. reduced commitments, established fixed decision rules for routine tasks, and practiced structured pauses before disengaging. Weekly check-ins tracked energy levels and communication patterns. Adjustments were made as new stressors emerged.

Results & Recommendations

Within one month, A.M. reported improved mental clarity and resumed regular communication. Social engagement returned gradually without pressure. Stress scores declined, and self-reported exhaustion decreased. The case suggests that decision fatigue can mimic emotional withdrawal and may require structural, not purely emotional, interventions. Future support should focus on load management for high-functioning individuals.

References & Appendices

Supporting materials include interview guides, assessment instruments, and anonymized reflection excerpts. These materials are available in the appendices for transparency and instructional use.