

THE DOPAMINE MENU

This Dopamine Menu is adapted from the work of Eric Tivers and Jessica McCabe, with reference to Christine Miserandino's Spoon Theory

Dopamine activities are things that make you feel satisfied and things that you crave or want that are likely to motivate you/drive you by the promise of reward.

We are going to make a menu of activities that involve dopamine.

The menu will help you to work out which activities provide the most reward and calculate how to manage the effort involved.

Planning a dopamine menu, means that when your brain is craving a dopamine hit, you can more easily make informed decisions about your activity options, rather than reaching for the go-to temporary fixes.

Serotonin and oxytocin are also chemicals involved in pleasurable and relaxing activities, so they may be involved in some of the menu items too, but the main focus should be on the feelings of reward and wanting in the activity.



Instructions



1. **list your dopamine activities**
2. **sort your activities into categories of snacks, mains, and desserts**
3. **circle the number of spoons each activity costs**
4. **list side dish activities**
5. **write discounts for each of the mains to reduce their spoons cost**
6. **save or screenshot your menu to your phone for easy access**

Spoons = A common metaphor in neurodivergence for how much cognitive effort something takes. If an activity required a lot of brainpower or effort, we might say it used a lot of spoons. You will decide the cost/price of your menu item activities according to how many spoons they use up.

Snacks/Appetisers = Activities that give you a quick pick-me-up and are not time or spoon-intensive. Activities where the ratio of spoons to reward is low! ie: low effort for an easy short burst of dopamine.

Main Courses = Activities with big rewards in terms of dopamine both in short term and longterm, and often leading to a more sustained and gradual release of dopamine, but may require more spoons or effort.

Desserts = Automatic go-to dopamine fixes when bored or stressed but that tend to be overdone. The difference between desserts versus snacks and mains is that mains and snacks tend to fuel you or provide meaningful entertainment or comfort or reward. Sometimes you might indulge in desserts to just distract yourself, escape, or entertain yourself, or because they are easy and that's okay! But just like the food pyramid, dessert items are activities you want to avoid doing all the time if you can help it - they might become things you do to procrastinate or you find they eat up your free time or you have other methods of distraction/comfort/entertainment that are more rewarding.

THE DOPAMINE MENU EXAMPLES

The number of spoons coloured indicates the effort/cost of each activity item

Snacks/Appetisers

Things that give you a quick pick-me-up and are not time or spoon-intensive - the ratio of spoons to dopamine is low!

- Making a cup of tea/coffee
- Having a morning tea/afternoon tea snack like a banana
- Having a movement break - getting up and stretching or going for a walk around the block or to a different part of the house.
- Playing with a pet or taking pet for a walk
- Watching a film you've wanted to see for a while or reading a book you know you will enjoy.



Main Courses

Items that may be more costly in terms of time and effort, but that are very rewarding and dopamine-rich (maybe oxytocin and serotonin rich too!)

- Cooking a meal
- Getting to health appointments, workplace
- Quality time with loved ones, friends, family, partner
- Gym/Yoga
- Practicing an instrument eg: learning musical pieces on guitar or piano
- Completing a personal, creative, or work project eg: building an object, editing a video, writing CV and job application, writing a paper or report.
- Preparing for cultural events or celebrations. eg: costumes, training or rehearsing etc for performances or sports



Desserts

- Doomscrolling social media for hours
- Scrolling my FYP on Tiktok for hours
- Binge-watching boring TV
- Gaming alone for hours



THE DOPAMINE MENU EXAMPLES



Side Dishes and Discounts

You can make activities from your main courses more likely to happen by working out how to make them cost less spoons or by pairing them with another enjoyable activity.

For example, if going to gym is very rewarding in terms of dopamine both short term and longterm, it's a main menu item, but it may be more costly in that it uses up a lot of spoons, so it's hard to actually achieve or motivate yourself to complete. The solution? Discounts! Introduce ways to reduce the spoons it uses up - having a bag with gym clothes ready next to your door to reduce effort in getting ready for the gym. Or have the yoga class timetable saved on your phone with visual pop up reminders. These would be "**Discounts**" on the menu.

You can also increase motivation by pairing the activity with an enjoyable "**Side**" item - maybe I will go to the gym with a friend, or complete a task while listening to my favourite music playlist.

Sides

Things to pair with other activities to make them more enjoyable/dopamine inducing

- Listening to music
- Body doubling
- Being in nature
- Sitting in a comfortable seat
- Using a fidget tool/sensory tool/stimming
- Playing a simple puzzle or game that can be done while listening/talking
- Crochet/knitting/weaving or other simple, repetitive and automatic activity with your hands that can be done while listening/talking

Discounts

Reduce the number of spoons/effort involved in an activity and therefore increase the likelihood you will do it. You can work on these with a professional.

- Visual Reminders
- Pre-planning and preparing - chunking and stepping tasks, creating checklists
- Increasing accessibility
- Reducing environmental distractions and overstimulation

NB ... if you want to avoid an activity, you can do the opposite of discounting and increase the spoons cost by reversing the above - increasing accessibility barriers, removing visual reminders, etc.

MY

DOPAMINE

MENU

**PLEASE SEE
DISCOUNTS AND SIDES
FOR REDUCED COST*

Snacks/Appetisers

1.



2.



3.



4.



Main Courses

1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



Desserts

1.



2.



3.



4.



MY

DOPAMINE



MENU

Sides

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Discounts

Main Course

Visual Reminders:

-
-

Pre-planning and Preparing:

-
-

Improving Accessibility:

-
-

Reducing Distraction and Overstimulation:

-
-

MY

DOPAMINE



MENU

Discounts continued

Main Course

Visual Reminders:

-
-

Pre-planning and Preparing:

-
-

Improving Accessibility:

-
-

Reducing Distraction and Overstimulation:

-
-

Main Course

Visual Reminders:

-

Pre-planning and Preparing:

-

Improving Accessibility:

-

Reducing Distraction and Overstimulation:

-