

*The fighter fails his saving throw against the death ray and drops to the ground, slain. The party gasps. Without the help of their powerful ally, this will be a formidable battle. And, indeed, it is.*

*After several rounds of damage and dodging, the monster lies dead beside the fallen fighter. The cleric checks her spell slots and moans woefully. The fight drained her of the power she needs to cast even the lowest of revival spells; she has no hope of bringing this fallen comrade back to life.*

*The power-built paladin casts one final Searing Smite as his blade finds its mark. A flash of flame, an extra roll for damage, and the battle is won. The rest of the party prepares to move on to the next chamber, but the paladin stops them.*

*"I am all out of spells," he protests. "We must camp for the night. Again."*

*The party groans in dismay; this is the third time they have had to camp in the past 24 hours. And each time it was due to a certain spell-happy party member using all of their resources in a single battle.*

*The barbarian rolls again to test his strength against the door. It does not budge. "That's the fourth time you have rolled to force open this door," the DM reminds him.*

*"I can do it," the barbarian insists, then rolls a fifth time. It's a 20. "Okay," the player says, clapping his hands in anticipation, "I'm charging into the next room!"*

*"But you have a level of exhaustion from straining against the door for so long," the DM cautions, his words largely ignored.*

*Shrugging, the player and his barbarian both reply, "Who plays by those rules anymore?"*

Who indeed?

When Dungeons and Dragons, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, came out in 2014, the rules for exhaustion were confusing in both interpretation and origin. What did they mean, and what did the authors have in mind when they developed this enigmatic system? Many house-rules favored abandoning the game mechanic altogether, much to the chagrin of a great many DMs who wished they could have some means to reel in their more exuberant players: the power-build who quickly expends their resources to employ mighty combo-moves in every round of combat; the spell-slinging sorceress who never finishes a fight with any remaining power; the greedy rogue who re-rolls five times before his lock picking skills finally open the chest. All of these scenarios justify the use of exhaustion, yet many DMs are reluctant to employ such complicated and confusing rules.

But what if there were a way to fix Exhaustion so that it was both enjoyable and fair?

First, despite the core manuals failing to explain this, the reason there are 6 levels of exhaustion is because they were meant to be tracked on a d6, similar to how such die are used to track buffs and resources in Magic the Gathering. Even with a six-sided die in front of every player, however, the effects of those six levels of exhaustion are hard to track. The 2024 rules did little to remedy that statement. This is where my own proposed game mechanics of "Fatigue" and "Desperation" come in.

Fatigue is the first and lesser effect of overexertion. DMs may use this to rein in a player who wants to continue with a futile task (such as forcing a door despite failing their first Strength check). Fatigue can easily be tracked

by a d6 in front of each player (or secretly tracked behind the DM's screen if players are tempted to be dishonest). Simply put, for each point of fatigue, up to 6, the DM adds one point to the DC and AC of all of that character's rolls (as well as added to the saving throws of creatures targeted by that character's spells). Fatigue would be easily gained and easily removed—gained by such acts as making multiple attempts to pry open a tough chest or “taking ten” to search a room while also remaining wary for ambushes, removed by eating certain foods or drinks (and completely removed, perhaps, by a short rest).

To revisit our example of the barbarian forcing the door, the first failed roll would result in no fatigue, but after that, for each additional “attempt”, fatigue increases by 1. This means that the DC of the door increases from 20 on the first two tries to 21 on the third, 22 on the fourth, and 23 on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Had the barbarian forced the door on the second attempt, they would have still gained a point of fatigue for having used an additional roll to do so. Consequently, when the party encounters that minotaur in the next room, the barbarian must roll against an AC of 15 (or 18 in the first example), whereas the rest of the party need only roll against the beast's normal AC of 14.

Fatigue is limited to a single d6, so if a character gains more fatigue than 6, that is when exhaustion rules set in. Additional actions that cause fatigue now increase exhaustion, which would be tracked with a separate d6. If the character manages to accumulate 7 points of exhaustion, they die. Different houses may agree on different effects at this point, but, at the least, the character's movement speed should be cut in half (rounded down to the nearest 5 feet) while exhausted. Exhaustion also prevents the character from removing fatigue by eating or resting; they first must remove the exhaustion before they can recover from

fatigue. And exhaustion is harder to get rid of, each point requiring a long rest to be removed. So a character who gains a point of exhaustion is going to be stuck with it until the next long rest.

This sounds like a punishment for players who play creatively, but here is where it gets tantalizing for the rest of the table. Like “Inspiration”, “Desperation” is a game mechanic a player can use to give their character a temporary advantage. In the case of inspiration, this option is limited by the amount of inspiration each player is allowed to have. In the case of desperation, this ability would be limited by the consequences of fatigue and exhaustion.

Desperation is the opportunity for players to tap an ability that has run out of resources. Whenever a player overextends their character's limits, the DM can call for a desperation roll. The first time this roll is made, use a d8. The face value of this roll is added to that character's Fatigue. If more than 6 fatigue points are gained, the character adds the remainder of the roll as points of exhaustion. This means the character may now require several days' worth of rest before they can get rid of the effects of their desperation. However, it can also create heroic moments at your table.

Consider the cleric in the example above. As the body of her ally grows cold, she hastens to prepare one last, desperate spell to bring him back. In this case, the DM could use the spell's level instead of rolling for desperation, causing the cleric to gain fatigue equal to the level of spell they are trying to cast. At most tables, this is going to open up the opportunity for those lower-level spell casters to use their magic more between rests. It would be quite tempting for a wizard well-equipped with refreshing rations to allow a few fatigue points to accumulate in exchange for a few extra spells in combat. However, the caster's casting ability, as well as

spell DC, is affected by fatigue, so prolific use of this mechanic is going to result in the loss of efficiency for many a spell.

Now consider the example above where the paladin has used his last spell slot, but continues to use Searing Smite with each additional round of battle. He may be consistently rolling 20+ on his attack roll, but if he has 6 points of fatigue, every target's AC is going to be increased by 6, increasing the chance that those 20+ attack rolls may miss. Meanwhile, the other members of the party who played more responsibly with their resources and energy now have a chance to get in a few hits before the fight is over.

Finally, consider the potential for food being a useful in-game mechanic, with daily rations not only staving off exhaustion but also helping to restore fatigue. If you have players who like the idea of collecting different kinds of food beyond "rations", this is going to appeal to them. Various food items would have stronger effects, giving even the most battle-focused players an incentive to spend a little time "shopping" for the kinds of snacks that will best suit their character's playing style.

A comprehensive list of grocery items won't fit into this blog, and I'm sure that, if you have players who like this aspect of the game (I do at my table), you will want to customize your list of available foods to suit their own fantasy. From sweet rolls to chocolate bars to large, juicy melons, consider the weight and amount of fatigue each food item might replenish before pricing them (think in terms of copper coins). Also consider that only one food item can be eaten at a time, and they usually require one to ten minutes to consume (often while the rest of the party is busy elsewhere).

In closing, here is a simplified explanation of the Fatigue/Exhaustion mechanic:

- Fatigue is gained from unsportsmanlike exertion or desperation. Casting a spell or using an ability after it has expended all of its uses also causes fatigue.
- Each point of fatigue increases AC, DC, or the saving throws of targets affected by the fatigued character's spells or abilities. The DM silently adds this penalty to each roll as applicable.
- Fatigue may be reduced by eating energizing food or by taking a short rest.
- After 6 points of fatigue have been gained, the character gains 1 point of exhaustion for each additional point of fatigue.
- Exhaustion halves movement speed and requires one long rest to remove. For each additional point of exhaustion, an additional long rest must be performed.