

Strengthening Self-Control

A large body of research has been developed in recent years to explain many facets of willpower. Most of the researchers exploring self-control do so with an obvious goal in mind: How can willpower be strengthened? If willpower is truly a limited resource, as the research suggests, what can be done to conserve it?

Avoiding temptation is one effective tactic for maintaining self-control. In Walter Mischel's marshmallow study, the children who stared directly at the treat were less likely to resist it than were kids who closed their eyes, turned away or otherwise distracted themselves.

The "out of sight, out of mind" principle applies to adults, too. One recent study, for instance, found office workers who kept candy in a desk drawer indulged less than when they kept the candy in plain sight.

Another helpful tactic for improving self-control is a technique that psychologists call an "implementation intention." Usually these intentions take the form of "if-then" statements that help people plan for situations that are likely to foil their resolve. For example, someone who is watching their alcohol intake might say before a party, "If anyone offers me a drink, then I'll ask for club soda with lime." Research among adolescents and adults has found that implementation intentions improve self-control, even among people whose willpower has been depleted by laboratory tasks. Having a plan in place ahead of time may allow you to make decisions in the moment without having to draw on your willpower.

The research suggesting that we possess a limited reservoir of self-control raises a troubling question: When we face too many temptations, are we destined to fail? Not necessarily. Researchers don't believe that one's willpower is ever completely exhausted. Rather, people appear to hold some willpower in reserve, conserved for future demands. The right motivation allows us to tap into those reserves and persevere even when our self-control strength has been run down.

In a demonstration of this idea, Mark Muraven found that willpower-depleted individuals persisted on a self-control task when they were told they'd be paid for their efforts, or that their efforts would benefit others (such as helping to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease). High motivation, he concludes, might help overcome weakened willpower — at least to a point.

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Researchers who study self-control often describe it as being like a muscle that gets fatigued with heavy use. But there is another aspect to the muscle analogy, they say. While muscles become exhausted by exercise in the short term, they are strengthened by regular exercise in the long term. Similarly, regularly exerting self-control may improve willpower strength.

In one of the first demonstrations of this idea, Muraven and his colleagues asked volunteers to follow a two-week regimen to track their food intake, improve their moods or improve their posture. Compared to a control group, the participants who had exerted self-control by performing the assigned exercises were less vulnerable to willpower depletion in follow-up lab tests. In another study, he found that smokers who practiced self-control for two weeks by avoiding sweets or regularly squeezing a handgrip were more successful at quitting smoking than control subjects who performed two weeks of regular tasks that required no self-control, such as writing in a diary.

Others have also found that flexing your willpower muscles can strengthen self-control over time. Australian scientists Megan Oaten, PhD, and Ken Cheng, PhD, of Macquarie University in Sydney, assigned volunteers to a two-month program of physical exercise — a routine that required willpower. At the end of two months, participants who had stuck with the program did better on a lab measure of self-control than participants who were not assigned to the exercise regimen. The subjects also reported smoking less and drinking less alcohol, eating healthier food, monitoring their spending more carefully and improving their study habits. Regularly exercising their willpower with physical exercise, it seemed, led to stronger willpower in nearly all areas of their lives.

The finding that willpower depletion is tied to glucose levels also suggests a possible remedy. Eating regularly to maintain blood-sugar levels in the brain may help refuel run-down willpower stores. (But don't let the term "sugar" fool you. Healthy meals without refined sugar are actually better than sweets at keeping blood-sugar levels on an even keel, experts say.) Dieters, who are aiming to maintain willpower and cut calories, might do better eating frequent small meals rather than skipping breakfast or lunch.

The evidence from willpower-depletion studies also suggests that making a list of resolutions on New Year's Eve is the worst possible approach. Being depleted in one area can reduce willpower in other spheres, so it makes more sense to



focus on one goal at a time. In other words, don't try to quit smoking, adopt a healthy diet and start a new exercise plan at the same time. Taking goals one by one is a better approach. Once a good habit is in place, Baumeister says, you'll no longer need to draw on your willpower to maintain the behavior. Eventually healthy habits will become routine and won't require making decisions at all.

Many questions about the nature of self-control remain to be answered by further research. Yet it seems likely that with clear goals, good self-monitoring and a little practice, you can train your willpower to stay strong in the face of temptation.

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