



Harnessing Willpower TO MEET YOUR GOALS

Many people believe they could improve their lives if only they had more of that elusive quality known as willpower or self-control. With more self-control everyone would eat right, exercise regularly, avoid drugs and alcohol, save for retirement, stop procrastinating and achieve all sorts of noble goals.

Willpower is the ability to resist short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals. Some might simply describe it as delaying gratification for a specific purpose. People use willpower every day, in one form or another, whether it is resisting the urge to surf the Web when there is work to do or choosing a salad for lunch instead of a burger.

The American Psychological Association's *Stress in America*™ survey revealed that lack of willpower was the most significant barrier to change. Yet although many people blame imperfect willpower for their imperfect choices, it is clear they haven't given up hope. A majority of respondents believe that willpower is something that can be learned.

IS WILLPOWER A LIMITED RESOURCE?

Similar to a muscle, willpower can be strengthened over time.ⁱ But people have a set amount of willpower and if it is overused, it can be depleted. A growing body of research suggests that repeatedly resisting temptation may drain stores of willpower.

However, researchers don't believe that one's willpower is ever completely exhausted. Rather, people appear to hold some willpower in reserve for future demands. The right motivation allows people to tap into those reserves and persevere even when self-control strength has been run down.

While muscles become fatigued by overuse in the short term, they are strengthened by regular exercise in the long term. People can learn to use willpower more effectively so their resources go further and, as with muscles, may even be able to strengthen it.

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, people can train their willpower to stay strong in the face of temptation.

RESEARCH SHOWS THERE ARE THREE STEPS TO ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS:

- Establish motivation for change and set a clear goal.
- Monitor behavior working toward that goal.
- Exercise willpower to prepare for success.ⁱⁱ



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Certain strategies have been shown to help build up self-control:

- **Focus on one goal at a time.** Psychologists have found that it is more effective to focus on a single, clear goal rather than taking on a list of goals at once. Succeeding at the first goal will free up willpower so it can then be devoted to the next goal. Work on one behavior at a time, like going for a 45-minute walk a few times every week or setting aside 20 minutes every day to study for upcoming exams.
- **Avoid temptations.** Avoiding temptations is an effective tactic for maintaining self-control. It can be helpful to keep temptations out of the house or, at the very least, out of sight. This “out of sight, out of mind” approach works for all sorts of scenarios. For example, it’s important to have a workspace conducive to studying with minimal distractions. When people need to focus, they might want to turn off their phone, sign out of email and eliminate any other distractions from their environment.
- **Make a plan.** Having a plan in place may help people resist temptations without having to draw on willpower, research suggests.ⁱⁱⁱ Decide ahead of time how to react to situations that are likely to foil 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 a club soda with lime.” Having a plan in place ahead of time allows people to make decisions in the moment without having to draw on willpower.
- **Monitor behavior toward the end goal.** Make a reasonable plan to meet the end goal and recommit each day to making progress toward that goal. If reducing spending is the objective, keep track of where all money is being spent. Research shows that often, recording behavior makes people more aware and helps to change that behavior.

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- **Reward yourself.** When you reach milestones, reward yourself for a job well done, but make sure the reward does not conflict with the change you are trying to make, like eating a bowl of ice cream because you lost five pounds. Instead, take time to engage in another pleasurable but healthy activity. For example, if you’re working on a tight deadline, get up and move around every so often to reward yourself with a break.
- **Get sufficient sleep.** Sleep deprivation can affect how the mind and body use energy, which affects the ability to resist temptation. When people don’t get enough sleep, their willpower is more likely to fail. However, even just one night of quality sleep can help to boost self-control.^{iv}
- **Seek support.** Research shows that having support systems can help people reach their goals. Surround yourself with people you trust and who you know will be supportive of your goals and willing to help you succeed.

HOW CAN A PSYCHOLOGIST HELP?

If you are trying to improve your self-control, a psychologist can help. Psychologists are trained to help people identify problem areas and then develop an action plan for changing them. To learn more, visit apa.org/helpcenter.

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ⁱ Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D. M. (1998). Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(5), 1252–1265.

ⁱⁱ Baumeister, R., & Tierney, J. (2011). *Willpower: Rediscovering the greatest human strength*. New York: Penguin Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Duckworth, A. L., Grand, H., Loew, B., Oettingen, G., & Gollwitzer, P. M. (2010). Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: Benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intentions. *Educational Psychology*, 31, 17–26.

^{iv} McGonigal, K. (2012). *The willpower instinct: How self-control works, why it matters, and what you can do to get more of it*. New York: Avery/Penguin Group USA.