

Harnessing willpower to meet educational goals



When it comes to meeting educational goals — whether you're studying for a math test, writing your dissertation or learning a new language — staying focused can be difficult. If you have a hard time resisting short-term temptations so you can meet long-term goals, you're not alone. According to APA's 2011 [Stress in America survey](#), Americans believe the number one barrier to making positive behavior changes is a lack of willpower.

Being able to call upon your willpower will serve you well in school and beyond. In one [study](#), students who were better able to delay gratification earned better grades and higher test scores, had better attendance records and were more likely to get into a competitive high school program.¹ The researchers' conclusion? Self-discipline may be even more important than IQ when it comes to predicting academic success.

Those differences last, too. In one groundbreaking [study](#), researchers told preschoolers they could have one marshmallow immediately or two if they could wait for a few minutes.² As teens, the children who were able to hold out were more likely to earn higher SAT scores. Plus, their parents reported, they were better able to plan, handle stress and frustration, and concentrate without getting distracted.

What You Can Do

A growing body of [research](#) suggests that repeatedly resisting temptation may deplete your stores of willpower, similar to the way overuse can tire out your muscles.³ But you can learn to use your willpower more effectively and, as with your muscles, you may even be able to strengthen your willpower. Try these strategies:

- **Avoid temptations.** In the marshmallow study described above, children who stared at the treat were less likely to resist it than those who closed their eyes, turned away or distracted themselves. "Out of sight, out of mind" works when you're studying, too. When you need to focus, turn off your phone, sign out of email and eliminate any other distractions from your environment.
- **Make a plan.** Having a plan in place may help you resist temptations without having to draw on your willpower, [research](#) suggests.⁴ Decide ahead of time how you will react to situations that are likely to foil your resolve. If you need to spend the weekend studying, for example, you might tell yourself, "If someone invites me out, I'll suggest a Sunday night outing as a reward for studying."
- **Consider your motivations.** Are you striving to meet your educational goals because of your own desires or because someone else — your parents, perhaps, or your boss — is pushing you? [Research](#) suggests that people-pleasers have a harder time with willpower than individuals driven by their own goals and desires.⁵ And what is motivating you may be just as important as who. Other [research](#) has found that even when people's willpower is wavering, they will persist with tasks requiring self-control if they're told they will be rewarded or that their efforts will

benefit others.⁶ Try tapping into your reserves of willpower by thinking about what motivates you, such as a college degree or better job.

- **Think you can.** How you think about willpower itself is also important. In one [study](#), researchers found that people who think willpower is a limited resource are more likely to have willpower problems than those who don't think of it as easily exhausted.⁷
- **Fuel your willpower.** Your brain runs on glucose, or blood sugar. But exerting self-control can leave brain cells consuming glucose at a fast pace. Feeding your brain may help restore your willpower, [research](#) suggests.⁸ Eating regular meals can keep your blood-sugar levels on an even keel and may help refuel your run-down willpower.
- **Focus on one goal at a time.** The evidence suggests that making a list of New Year's resolutions isn't a great idea. That's because having your willpower become depleted in one realm may reduce willpower in other realms. Instead of trying to adopt better study habits, exercise more and quit smoking all at the same time, take your goals one by one. Once a good habit becomes routine, you no longer need to draw as much on your willpower to maintain it.

How a Psychologist Can Help

If you need help building your willpower, consult with a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional. He or she can help you identify problem areas and then develop an action plan for changing them.

Practicing psychologists use a variety of evidence-based treatments — most commonly psychotherapy — to help people improve their lives. Psychologists, who have doctoral degrees, receive one of the highest levels of education of any health care professional. On average, they spend seven years in education and training following their undergraduate degrees; moreover, psychologists are required to take continuing education to maintain their professional standing.

Additional Resources

- [What you need to know about willpower: The psychological science of self-control](#)
- [Harnessing willpower to meet your goals](#)
- [APA's Stress in America Survey](#)
- [The key to making lasting lifestyle and behavioral changes: Is it will or skill?](#)

Article Sources

¹ Duckworth, A., & Seligman, M. (2005). "Self discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance in adolescents." *Psychological Science*, 16(12): 939-944.

² Mischel, M., et al. (1989). "Delay of gratification in children." *Science*, 244 (4907): 933-938.

³ Baumeister, et al. (1998). "Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74 (5): 1252-1265.

⁴ Duckworth, A., et al. (2011). "Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: Benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intentions." *Educational Psychology*, 31 (1): 17-26.

⁵ Muraven, M., Gagné, M., & Rosman, H. (2008). "Helpful self-control: Autonomy support, vitality, and depletion." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44 (3): 573-585.

⁶ Muraven, M., & Slessareva, E. (2003). "Mechanism of self-control failure: Motivation and limited resources." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29: 894-906.

⁷ Job, V., Dweck, C.S., & Walton, G.M. (2010). "Ego depletion—Is it all in your head? Implicit theories about willpower affect self-regulation." *Psychological Science*, 21 (11): 1686-1693.

⁸ Gailliot, M., et al. (2007). "Self-control relies on glucose as a limited energy source: Willpower is more than a metaphor." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92 (2): 325-336.

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