

Willpower and Living Healthy



Willpower is tested every day, whether it is hitting the snooze button rather than taking your early morning run or choosing an apple over a cupcake at lunchtime. The decisions that lead to a healthier life are often difficult, and the American Psychological Association's most recent [Stress in America survey](#) revealed that not having enough willpower was the top reason people cited for being unable to make healthy lifestyle changes.

In the most recent Stress in America survey, 57 percent of respondents reported losing weight as a goal for the next year, and 50 percent wanted to eat a healthier diet, with the majority saying they wanted to take these steps in order to be healthier and feel better. However, in reality, people don't always achieve their goals, and APA's Stress in America survey showed that fewer than 1 in 5 adults report being successful at making health-related improvements.

Part of the explanation for this may be that people struggle with having enough willpower.

Willpower is the ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals. One reason adopting healthy behaviors may be so difficult is that resisting temptation can take a mental toll. In fact, some experts liken willpower to a [muscle that can get fatigued from overuse](#). The good news is that, like a muscle, willpower can be strengthened to help achieve lifestyle-related goals, such as eating healthy or losing weight.

If you feel that a lack of willpower is holding you back from achieving healthy goals, there are techniques that can help you strengthen your 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 attacking a list of goals at once. Succeeding at the first goal will free up your willpower so it can then be devoted to the next goal. Focus on changing one health habit first whether it's exercising more during the week or eating smaller food portions daily.
- **Monitor your behavior toward your goal:** Don't let a slip-up take you off track. Make a reasonable plan to meet your goal and recommit each day to making progress toward that goal. If weight loss or healthy eating is your aim, track what you eat. Research shows that people who track their daily food intake are more likely to succeed at weight loss.
- **Seek support:** Research shows that having support systems can help you reach your goals. Surround yourself with people you trust and who you know will be supportive of your goals and willing to help you succeed.

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](#)

Article Sources

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