

Willpower: An Introduction

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

Take, for example, the results of the American Psychological Association's annual *Stress in America*™ survey. The survey asks, among other things, about participants' abilities to make healthy lifestyle changes. Survey participants regularly cite lack of willpower as the No. 1 reason for not following through with such changes.

In 2011, 27 percent of survey respondents reported that lack of willpower was the most significant barrier to change. Yet although many people blame imperfect willpower for their imperfect choices, it's clear they haven't given up hope. A majority of respondents believe that willpower is something that can be learned.

Those respondents are onto something. Recent research suggests some ways in which willpower can, in fact, be strengthened with practice. Similarly, many survey participants reported that having more time for themselves would help them overcome their lack of willpower. However, willpower doesn't automatically flourish when you have extra time on your hands.

So, how can you resist when faced with temptation? In recent years, scientists have made some compelling discoveries about the ways that willpower works. This brief explores our current understanding of self-control.

WHAT WE KNOW NOW

Lack of willpower isn't the only reason a person might fail to reach their goals. Willpower researcher Roy Baumeister, PhD, a psychologist at Florida State University, describes three necessary components for achieving objectives:

- 1) Establishing the motivation for change and setting a clear goal.
- 2) Monitoring the behavior toward that goal.
- 3) Exercising willpower. Whether your goal is to lose weight, kick a smoking habit, study more or spend less time on Facebook, willpower is a critical step to achieving that outcome.

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At its essence, willpower is the ability to resist short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals, and there are good reasons to do so. University of Pennsylvania psychologists Angela Duckworth, PhD, and Martin Seligman, PhD, explored self-control in eighth graders over the course of a school year. The researchers first gauged the students' self-discipline (their term for self-control) by having teachers, parents and the students complete questionnaires. They also gave students a task in which they had the option of receiving \$1 immediately or waiting a week to receive \$2. They found students who ranked high on self-discipline had better grades, better school attendance and higher standardized-test scores, and were more likely to be admitted to a competitive high school program. Self-discipline, the researchers found, was more important than IQ in predicting academic success.

FURTHER READING

Baumeister, R., & Tierney, J. (2011). *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. New York: Penguin Press.

Duckworth, A. (2011). The significance of self-control. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108(7), 2639–2640.

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

Moffitt, T., et al. (2011). A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108, 2693–2698.

Tangney, J., Baumeister, R., & Boone, A. L. (2004). High self-control predicts good adjustment, less pathology, better grades, and interpersonal success. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 271–324.

Other studies have uncovered similar patterns. June Tangney, PhD, of George Mason University, and colleagues compared willpower by asking undergraduate students to complete questionnaires designed to measure their self-control. The scientists also created a scale to score each student's relative willpower strength. They found the self-control scores correlated with higher grade point averages, higher self-esteem, less binge eating and alcohol abuse, and better relationship skills.

The benefits of willpower seem to extend well beyond the college years. Terrie Moffitt, PhD, of Duke University, and colleagues studied self-control in a group of 1,000 individuals who were tracked from ages birth to 32 as part of a long-term health study in Dunedin, New Zealand. She and her colleagues found that individuals with high self-control in childhood (as reported by teachers, parents and the children themselves) grew into adults with greater physical and mental health, fewer substance abuse problems and criminal convictions, and better savings behavior and greater financial security. Those patterns held even after the researchers controlled for the children's socioeconomic status, home lives and general intelligence.

Such findings underscore the importance of willpower in nearly all areas of life.