

PUTTING THE “SELF” IN SELF-CONTROL

Finding Your Drive

It's easy to feel like motivation, willpower, and perseverance are qualities that we either have or don't have (usually the latter!). But we all have the ability to develop and exercise these aspects of self-control. Use this worksheet to outline strategies that may be helpful to you.

Identify a self-control challenge you face – something you struggle to start, stop, or maintain.

What is your motivation to address this challenge? What will the outcome mean for you?

What do you notice when your willpower gives way? What's happening? How do you feel? Are there any patterns?

Can you recognize any mind traps or other conditions that get you off track? Try writing an “if...then” response.

Is something depleting your drive – poor sleep, unhealthy eating, stress, toxic people? How could you change that?

List at least three strategies from the seminar that you want to try in order to strengthen or grow your drive ability:

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WHAT'S YOUR EXCUSE?

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When it comes to self-control, the mind can play tricks on us. Exploring the excuses we use can help us see what's really happening when we give in. What's your favorite excuse?

“One won't hurt; I've been so good!”

This is called “moral licensing.” We use the fact that we've made positive moves to grant us permission to give in. Researchers have found that even just looking at a menu that includes healthy choices leads us to make more unhealthy choices. Why? When we achieve a small success, it temporarily quiets our rational brain, leaving the voice of our urges as the loudest. To get the rational brain back in play, notice this tendency. Consciously label positive moves as steps toward a goal, not completion. That makes giving in a threat to your progress.

“But it's for a good cause!”

This has been termed the “halo effect.” When we can link our action to something positive, we think of our action as being positive as well. Shopping at the thrift store, choosing organic or fat-free food, 2-for-1 deals, cookies for a cause, extreme couponing – all can give us permission to buy or eat more than we should. Time to take off the halo!

“What's the point? I've already blown it.”

Referred to as the “what the heck” response, we allow a slip-up to completely derail our goal. When willpower fails, it can create guilt and stress. That stress amps up the craving to feel better. Comforting urges often win out. Forgiveness can break this cycle. Stay calm and be kind to yourself. Instead of an emotional, “oh no!” response, try taking an “oh well” position. What's done is done. No one is perfect. I have to get back to my baseline.

“Everyone else is!”

Humans are highly attuned to what other humans do, think, and feel. We consciously and subconsciously mimic those around us. Think about how contagious yawning is! When facing a willpower challenge, it's valuable to identify the people who will support you and those who might prove to be a negative influence. Avoiding those who can derail you might be a strategy when you're struggling. Or have an “if...then” response ready to go.

“I'll start tomorrow.”

We are very quick to shift the pain of today to some future date. It's easy to ignore the fact that the person you will be tomorrow is the same person you are today. The action won't be easier and may even be harder. If this is a common excuse for you, try adding more structure to your goal. Write down your plan. Make success time-bound.

“I deserve it.”

Learn to talk back to yourself when you justify a choice with this classic reward center logic. Have a copy of your long-term goal nearby. Remember what else you deserve – that long-term outcome.

References

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

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BUILDING MOTIVATION MUSCLE

Finding Your Drive

Willpower and motivation take energy, and, like the muscles of our body, weaken with use. As with muscles, we can increase our ability through exercise. The following strategies can help you strengthen, maintain, and grow your drive ability.

Strengthen and maintain

- > Make sure goals are personally meaningful
- > Keep outcomes and moves realistic
- > Know what can derail your willpower
- > Be aware of sabotage thinking
- > Use an “if...then” script to be ready for challenges
- > Plan for the feelings – think progress, not deprivation
- > Reinforce progress with small rewards
- > Have a calm, kind response to slip-ups; self-compassion is a better motivator than self-criticism
- > Pay attention to surroundings, remove temptations
- > Use pre-commitment to make it harder to give up
- > Visualize your goal in detail, and then contrast with a visualization of the obstacles; do 5 minutes per day
- > Be accountable to others; make your goal public
- > Note feeling of satisfaction when you follow through
- > Be patient; new habits take time to establish
- > Use empowering thoughts: “It will get easier,” or “I want this,” not, “What’s the point?”
- > Be aware of “toxic” people
- > Remember that stress undermines willpower
- > Eat regular meals and healthy snacks
- > Get a good night’s sleep or nap to catch up
- > Power up self-control with a burst of exercise

Grow and develop

- > Practice small acts of self-control to build willpower. Examples: brush your hair with the wrong hand, straighten your posture periodically, or stop yourself from using a speech habit, such as “um,” in conversation.
- > Train your brain to notice and accept but not act on urges by practicing mindful meditation. Click on “Free Guided Meditations” at: www.marc.ucla.edu
- > Practice slowing your breathing by extending your exhale. Aim for 4-6 breaths in a minute. This cues a relaxation response via the mind/body connection. Doing this regularly helps the “thinking” part of the brain grow stronger and more able to prioritize self-control.
- > Surround yourself with motivated people; the positive actions of others can help us grow our own willpower.

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2012). What you need to know about willpower: The psychological science of self-control. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/willpower.aspx>

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

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