



PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

MAXIMIZE YOUR WILLPOWER

IT'S EASIER THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

BY MOLLY ROSE TEUKE

Do you ever wish you had more willpower? Of course, you do. It's a highly valued sign of character in our culture. Who doesn't want to be a better person?

But the truth is, we've been sold a bill of goods on willpower. We've been taught that if you have a lot of willpower, you are somehow standing on the moral high ground. I'd like to debunk that notion and share some tips on how to make the most of the willpower you do have.

When researchers ask people to name their strengths, they list honesty, a sense of humor, courage and many other traits. Almost no one mentions willpower, or the closely related idea of self-control. In a survey of over a million people around the world, willpower came in dead last as a strength. But ask people to name their biggest failing and lack of self-control tops the list.

The reality is, willpower is a finite resource that ebbs and flows in our lives, and it's helpful to know what makes it ebb and how to make it flow more freely.

In his book "Willpower," researcher Roy Baumeister suggests it's a good idea not to deplete your willpower by spreading it around. Do you make New Year's resolutions? How many? You are most likely to succeed, Baumeister says, if you make just one and focus your willpower attention on that one thing.

TIP #1: KEEP IT SIMPLE

One thing at a time. Don't commit to developing a workout regimen at the same time you start a diet. If you're going into a meeting where someone will test your patience, don't squander your self-control on some other effort before the meeting.

TIP #2: FEED IT

You can fuel willpower, literally. Willpower requires glucose, a simple sugar manufactured in the body by all kinds of foods (not just sweet ones). Let your glucose levels drop, and your willpower fades. There's even evidence that children who get a good breakfast are much better behaved at school because they have enough glucose to give them self-control.

When you find yourself flagging at your desk and wonder how you can be so weak-willed as to check Facebook instead of finishing that report, know that you're not alone. Go have an apple.

TIP #3: DECLUTTER

We are more likely to have willpower and self-control in a tidy environment. Researchers learned this by inviting subjects to do self-control exercises in a messy lab. The control group, asked to do the same exercises in a tidy lab, performed much better. They even ran this online, asking people to complete a set of self-control exercises on a sloppy website with lots of typos and overlapping graphics — same result. Subjects did much better when they were taken to a neat website.

Turns out Mom was right... Make your bed! Pick up your socks! Clear the clutter! Not because it'll make you a better person, but because you'll enjoy more willpower and self-control.

TIP #4: BUILD IT

You can strengthen your willpower by practicing every day. The best way is through repeated small actions that build your capacity. If you resolve to save \$5,000 this year by curbing your spending, it might feel impossible. It's more realistic to resolve to save three dollars a day by skipping your daily latté and you'll begin to build the self-control muscle that will make it easier to say no to bigger expenditures.

You can begin building your willpower muscle today. Anything that requires effort qualifies. Brush your teeth with your nondominant hand. Be in bed by a certain hour each night. Put the cap on the toothpaste every day without fail. Eat a sit-down meal five nights a week. Resist checking your email hourly. Make your bed each morning, or rinse out the coffee pot before you leave for work. Even a small discipline that you repeat on a daily basis will help you literally build your willpower muscle.

TIP #5: PLAN AHEAD

Set yourself up for success. Know your weaknesses and take steps to minimize them. Research suggests that people who claim strong willpower don't exercise it any more than people who claim they lack willpower. They just exercise willpower in smarter ways. They use it to remove temptation instead of just resisting it. You don't need willpower to avoid being distracted by email, if you change your settings to turn off the email alert.

Researchers call this "precommitment." The secret is to precommit in ways that keep temptation out of reach and motivation close at hand. Leave your credit card at home when you go shopping with a friend. Avoid the snack aisle at the grocery store. If you're trying to cut down on holiday spending, toss the Christmas catalogs straight into the recycle bin. If you want to get into a habit of walking daily, throw out those ratty old sneakers that pinch your toes. Buy walking shoes that look good and feel good and make walking

a pleasure. Then set up a walking date with a friend, which means you've made the decision today to go walking tomorrow.

That's the most efficient use of willpower: Make decisions that make it easy to avoid the wrong actions and implement the right ones, whatever that means to you. Every time you do it, you strengthen your willpower muscle.

TIP #6: SET THE TIMER

Time is your friend, because small willpower commitments are easier than big ones. If you're procrastinating on a task, tell yourself you need to spend only 10 minutes on it. By the same token, if you're dying to eat that piece of cake, put it off for 10 or 15 minutes. Chances are you'll be better able to win the willpower battle when time is up.

BONUS TIP: REST IT

Get some sleep! According to Baumeister, a rested will is a strong will. You'll have less willpower for important things when you have to rely on it to stay awake. Get a good night's sleep tonight and enjoy more willpower tomorrow.

FINAL WORD

When you're frustrated that you don't have more willpower, cut yourself some slack. It's normal, and it's a matter of biology, not morality. Create your own strategies using these six tips, and let me know how you fare.

RESOURCES

- "Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength" ©2011 Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney
- "The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It" ©2012 Kelly McGonigal (kellymcgonigal.com/willpowerinstinct)



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