

USING UP YOUR WILLPOWER

WORDS BY DREW KNOWLES

It is 7pm on a Thursday night, at the end of a long day at work and you are in the supermarket with your spouse doing some shopping for things you need, plus trying to get some dinner to go home and cook. You look at each other and ask, “what do you feel like for dinner?” It seems on the surface a reasonably simple question and one would think not too hard to work out. But what happens is sometimes quite different. One of you says, “I don’t know, what do you feel like.” And the response is, “I don’t know. You decide.” And so begins the mammoth job of actually deciding what to have for dinner. Your spouse, trying to speed up the process proposes, “let’s just have a stir fry with some chicken.” You contemplate that for a moment, and with a conflicted tone and look on your face reply, “Nah, I don’t really feel like stir fry.” Your spouse by this time is agitated because of your indecisiveness and not going with their option and, in an irritated voice, lashes out “well, you decide then!” Your response to the unwarranted irritation is with a matched agitation, along the lines of, “well I don’t know what I feel like, and don’t have the energy to decide.” And they then say, “Well I made a suggestion and you don’t want that so whatever I come up with you won’t want, so you work out what you feel like and we can have that.” This tense and slightly heated exchange continues as you walk around aimlessly trying to decide what to have for dinner, and then you finally choose to get something you can just chuck in the oven because you are so over trying to think about what to have; an argument is not worth the trouble and is causing a major amount of tension between the two of you. Then you walk around, confronted by all the options of what else you might need, you feel more tired now, don’t have a list, so have to think hard about what things you are short of at home so you make sure the trip is not wasted and you don’t forget anything. You then get to the checkout via the chocolate or chips aisle (conveniently lined up with the main checkouts) and you both look at each other with starving eyes and look at the chips, and one of you grabs a big bag, and looks at the other for approval, who nods with an ‘I know we shouldn’t, but go for it’ look on their face. One addition of chocolate later you say, “A little something for dessert”, to which they reply, “why not? We deserve a little treat after a long day.” You proceed to the checkout, feeling noticeably drained and exhausted than when you walked in.

If you have ever had an experience like this, or a remotely similar experience that matches the theme of this one – albeit very simple and somewhat irrelevant in the scheme of your life – what you experienced was your willpower and self-control being depleted in a multitude of ways. The fact that glossy magazines and junk food are so close to the checkouts is because marketers who have access to many scientific studies about the brain understand the fact that once you have shopped for some time, your brain is depleted of resources to exert self-control from the amount of effort your pre-frontal cortex has to put in to get what you need. In short, you have less ability to resist the temptation of an ‘impulse buy’, which is what those purchases are so aptly termed.

In my studies on the mind and brain, I have been focusing recently on how our self-control/willpower can be managed better to improve our performance, productivity and overall state of mind. In their book *Willpower – Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength*, Baumeister and Tierney have broken new ground with the research they have done and written about, which is why I wanted to write this month’s article based on what I have learnt from studying it, and the associated research that went into it, and how we can use our willpower better.

When people are asked to name their greatest strengths, they may say things like honesty, kindness, humour, creativity, integrity and other virtues. Almost never will they say willpower or self-control. Self-control, or willpower came in a dead last among the virtues being studied by researchers who had surveyed more than one million people around the world. Of the two dozen character strengths listed in the researchers’ questionnaire, self-control was the one people were least likely to recognise in themselves. Conversely, when people were asked about their failings, a lack of self-control was at the top of the list.

This quote from the book says it all: “When psychologists isolate the personal qualities that predict ‘positive outcomes’ in life (achieving your goals), they consistently find two traits: intelligence and self-control. So far researchers still haven’t learned how to permanently increase intelligence. But they have discovered, or at least rediscovered, how to improve self-control. Improving willpower is the surest way to a better life.”

This month's article is about having you understand willpower in a way that you can apply it to your day-to-day life, such that you can perform better, be more productive, and have a better quality of life. When you don't respect that you have a limited amount of willpower available for the tasks that you must do in any given day or week, you will find yourself struggling to have the self-control needed to reach all your goals in the areas important to you. My commitment is that you will understand what it is, how we use it inefficiently in today's fast paced modern world, how you can strengthen it, the kinds of activities that deplete it unnecessarily, and practical ways you can use it to your strategic advantage for a better and more successful life.

HISTORY OF WILLPOWER

Willpower was a notion that was spawned by Victorians in the 19th Century as they saw themselves as living in a time of transition as the moral certainties and rigid institutions of medieval Europe died away. As Victorians fretted over moral decay and the social pathologies concentrated in cities, they looked for something more tangible than divine grace, some internal strength that could protect even an atheist. They began using the term willpower because of the folk notion that some kind of force was involved. The fascination with willpower ebbed in the twentieth century partly in reaction to the Victorians' excesses, and partly due to economic changes and the world wars.

Meanwhile, in the 1980's, a few researchers started getting interested in self-regulation, the term psychologists use for self-control. The resurrection of self-control wasn't led by theorists, who were still convinced that willpower was a quaint Victorian myth. But when other psychologists went into the laboratory or the field, they kept happening on something that looked an awful lot like it. It wasn't until recently, in Baumeister's laboratory, that scientists began systematically looking for this source of energy that we call "will". Until then, for most of the past century, psychologists and educators and the rest of the chattering classes kept finding one reason or another to believe it didn't exist.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND WILLPOWER

"People feel overwhelmed because there are more temptations than ever. Your body may have dutifully reported to work on time, but your mind can escape at any instant through the click of a mouse or a phone. You can put off any job by checking email or Facebook, surfing gossip sites, or playing a video game. A typical computer user checks out more than three dozen websites a day. Temptations never cease.

"We often think of willpower as an extraordinary force to be summoned to deal with emergencies, but that is not what Baumeister and his colleagues found when they monitored a group of more than two hundred men and women. Beepers would go off seven times a day and they would have to report whether they were currently experiencing some sort of desire or had recently felt such a desire. Desire turned out to be the norm, not the exception. About half the time, people were feeling some kind of desire at the moment their beeper went off, and a quarter said a desire had just been felt in the past few minutes. Many of these desires were ones they were trying to resist.

"The researchers concluded that people spend about a quarter of their waking hours resisting desires – at least four hours per day. Put another way, if you tapped four people at any random moment

in the day, one of them would be using willpower to resist a desire. And that doesn't even include all the instances in which willpower is exercised, because people use it for other things, too, such as making decisions. On average, when they tried to resist a desire with willpower, they succeeded about half the time."

– Roy F. Baumeister & John Tierney: *Willpower – Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*.

There have been a number of landmark experiments done on willpower in the last few decades. One notable one was the Marshmallow experiment in 1970's where four-year-old children were put into a room by themselves, and given one marshmallow on the desk in front of them to either eat now, or wait and get a second marshmallow to eat if they held out for the time they were left alone. The researcher followed the test subjects up many years later and those who had shown the most willpower at age four went on to get better grades and test scores. The children who had managed to hold out the entire 15 minutes went on to score 210 points higher on the SAT than the ones who had caved after the first half minute. The children with willpower grew up to become more popular with their peers and their teachers. They earned higher salaries. They had lower body-mass index, suggesting that they were less prone to gain weight as middle age encroached. They were less likely to report having problems with drug abuse.

“When psychologists isolate the personal qualities that predict “positive outcomes” in life (achieving your goals), they consistently find two traits: intelligence and self-control.”

Another notable and ground breaking study in New Zealand in 2010 showed that children with high self-control grew up into adults who had better physical health, including lower rates of obesity, fewer sexually transmitted diseases, and even healthier teeth. The children with poor self-control tended to wind up poorer financially. They worked in relatively low paying jobs, had little money in the bank, and were less likely to own a home or have money set aside for retirement. They also grew up to have more children being raised in single-parent households, presumably because they had a harder

time adapting to the discipline required for a long-term relationship. The children with good self-control were much more likely to wind up in a stable marriage and raise children in a two-parent home. The children with poor self-control were more likely to end up in prison. Among those with the lowest levels of self-control, more than 40 percent had a criminal conviction by the age of 32, compared with just 12 percent of the people who had been toward the high end of the self-control distribution in their youth.

The results could not have been clearer, self-control (willpower) is a vital strength and key to success in life.

The Radish Experiment was another very notable experiment where test subjects had to resist the temptation of chocolate and cookies next to them, and instead eat radishes that were put in front of them, compared to a group who were allowed to eat the chocolate and cookies freely. Those who successfully resisted the temptation of the cookies and the chocolates had less energy to tackle the puzzles and gave up much faster, because of the amount of self-control it took to resist temptation, depleting their willpower for the subsequent tasks to test it.

When researchers compared students' grades with nearly three dozen personality traits, self-control turned out to be the only trait that predicted a college student's grade-point average better than chance. Self-control also proved to be a better predictor of college grades than the student's IQ or SAT score.

In short, willpower exists as proved by all the experiments done over the last 30 years.

The adult human brain makes up two percent of the body but consumes more than 20 percent of its energy. Extra grey matter is useful only if it enables an animal to get enough extra calories to power it. The larger brain in humans did not evolve to deal with the physical environment, but rather with something even more crucial to survive: social life. Animals with larger brains had larger and more complex social networks. Humans are the primates who have the largest frontal lobes because we have the largest social groups, and that's apparently why we have the most need for self-control.

We tend to think of willpower as a force for personal betterment – adhering to a diet, getting work done on time, going out to jog, quitting smoking – but that's probably not the primary reason it evolved so fully in our ancestors. For animals to survive in a social group where food is involved and shared, without getting beaten up, they must restrain their urge to eat immediately.

Much of our self-control operates unconsciously. Nobody is aware of nerve cells firing. But the will is to be found in connecting units across time. Will involves treating the current situation as part of a general pattern. Smoking one cigarette will not jeopardise your health. Taking heroine once will not make you addicted. One piece of cake won't make you fat, and skipping one assignment won't ruin your career. But in order to stay healthy and employed, you must treat (almost) every episode as a reflection of the general need to resist these temptations. That's where conscious self-control comes in, and that's why it makes the difference between success and failure in just about every aspect of life.

Ego-depletion is another important aspect of willpower – people's diminished capacity to regulate their thoughts, feelings and actions. Ego-depletion causes a slowdown in the anterior cingulate cortex (executive centre of the brain), the brain's area that's crucial to self-control. As the brain slows down and it's error detection ability deteriorates, people have trouble controlling their reactions.

For symptoms of ego-depletion, look not for a single symptom but rather for a change in the overall intensity of your feelings. If you find yourself especially bothered by frustrating events, or saddened by unpleasant thoughts, or even happier about some good news – then maybe it's because your brain circuits aren't controlling emotions quite as well as usual. Ego-depletion creates a double whammy: Your willpower is diminished and your cravings feel stronger than ever.

In relation to stress, which is what my clients and so many of you are dealing with at chronic levels, it depletes willpower, which diminishes your ability to control your emotions. Ultimately, self-control lets you relax because it removes stress and enables you to conserve willpower for the important challenges.

USING WILLPOWER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

People feel overwhelmed because there are more temptations than ever and we are under much more strain than our ancestors.

The thousands of people studied in all the various experiments consistently demonstrated two lessons:

- You have a finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted as you use it.
- You use the same stock of willpower for all manner of tasks.

We can divide willpower into four broad categories:

- Control of thoughts.
- Control of emotions (affect regulation in relation to mood).

- Impulse control (controlling how you react to the impulse).
- Performance control (focussing your energy on the task at hand).

Setting goals and accomplishing them over time (however small) is one of the best ways to strengthen your willpower. Be mindful of having too many conflicting goals. For example if you want to improve your performance at work and this means staying a little longer to get certain things done, and you also set a goal of more family time, you may find that the competing demands of both goals and trying to juggle fulfilling both, depletes your willpower in one so you don't have the reserves for the other having negative consequences.

For some of you it will work to focus on one project at a time. If you set more than one self-improvement goal, you may succeed for a while by drawing on reserves to power through, but that just leaves you more depleted and more prone to serious mistakes later. Hence why sometimes you succeed in the morning at keeping to your new exercise plan, but then at the end of the day you are tired and your willpower is depleted, so you fail at sticking to your new eating plan.

I have covered this in a previous article, but it is important to remember that exerting self-control uses up the limited supply of glucose in the brain used for many different executive functions of the Pre-Frontal Cortex. So if you are doing activities that use a lot of your willpower, make sure before you make the next decision, or enter into the next activity that demands your concentration, you re-fuel first to avoid losing control of your ability to focus, stay rational and not react in ways you normally would not.

Planning and scheduling are critical for using your willpower to your advantage and conserving it for things that it really needs to be used for. Once the plan is formed, the unconscious can stop nagging the conscious mind with reminders. Effective planning should even budget your willpower. How will you expend your willpower today, this evening, and the next month?

It has also been shown in many experiments that making actual decisions depletes willpower, called decision fatigue. Also when you have less mental resources, it is harder to make decisions, and you will make less risky choices. The link between willpower and decision making works both ways: Decision making depletes your willpower, and once your willpower is depleted, you're less able to make decisions. The harder the decision, the more depletion, and the more you have to make the more you will start looking to conserve energy, and exercises to avoid or postpone decisions, you'll look for the easiest and safest option, which is often to stick with the status quo.

Decision fatigue leaves us vulnerable to marketers who know how to time their sales. Beware of making binding decisions when your energy is down, because you'll tend to favour options with short-term gains and delayed costs.

Self-control will be most effective if you take good basic care of your body, starting with diet and sleep. A rested will is a stronger will. Neatness will also boost your willpower. Studies show people exert less self-control after seeing a messy desk than after seeing a clean desk. These environmental cues subtly influence your brain and your behaviour, making it ultimately less of a strain to maintain self-discipline. Order seems to be contagious.

“You could sum up a large new body of research literature with a simple rule: The best way to reduce stress in your life is to stop screwing up. That means setting up your life so you have a realistic chance to succeed. Successful people don't use their willpower as a last-ditch defence to stop themselves from disaster, at least not

“ People with higher self-control report less stress in their lives. They use their self-control not to get through crises but to avoid them. ”

as a regular strategy.” – Baumeister and Tierney 2011.

People with good self-control mainly use it not for rescue in emergencies but rather to develop effective habits and routines in school and at work. People with higher self-control report less stress in their lives. They use their self-control not to get through crises but to avoid them. They give themselves enough time to finish a project; they take the car to the shop before it breaks down; they stay away from all you can eat buffets. They play offense instead of defence.

What matters is the exertion, not the outcome. If you struggle with temptation and then give in, you're still depleted because you struggled. So it is what you are using your willpower for that you want to look at and examine if you want to improve your performance, productivity and overall state of mind.

WILLPOWER DEPLETING ACTIVITIES

Here are some of the most common activities that deplete your willpower that you should watch for doing unnecessarily and strategically manage:

- Multi-tasking.
- Task switching .
- Acts of Self-control (resisting temptation/desire).
- Choices/decisions/consideration.
- Planning/thinking about the future.
- Holding multiple things in the mind.
- Trying to listen to someone while doing an unrelated task that requires your attention.
- Focusing/concentrating on any one task.
- Stress.

STRENGTHENING YOUR WILLPOWER

Willpower can be strengthened. The simplest way to do this, as demonstrated by many experiments, is to pick one habitual behaviour (big or small) and concentrate on changing it over a period of time. This could be as simple as sitting up straight every time you find yourself slouching, or using a different hand for routine tasks. The self-control it takes to change a habitual behaviour has been shown to increase your stamina for willpower and have you fatigue less in the future with other tasks that require it.

Exercising self-control in one area seems to improve all areas of life. There are remarkable benefits of exercising willpower. In the experiments done, people gained a wide array of benefits in areas of their lives that had nothing to do with the specific exercises they were performing. And the lab tests provided an explanation: Their willpower gradually got stronger, so it was less readily depleted. The experiments showed that you didn't have to start off with exceptional self-control. As long as you were motivated to do some kind of exercise, your overall willpower could improve.

USING WILLPOWER TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

There are many simple ways you can practically apply the principle of willpower to use it to your advantage and build your strength. Here are some simple examples of how I implement it:

- Stopping meetings with colleagues when they/my willpower is clearly depleted and productivity is declining.
- Schedule less willpower-demanding activities later in the week.
- Move your body between activities that deplete your willpower, or power-nap.
- Switch off phone/email/message systems at times in the day when you do not need to be available or need to focus your mind on one task.
- Decline being interrupted or stopping to handle things for people.

- Train your environment to not disrupt or distract you unnecessarily.
- Schedule according to the brain resources needed, and plan for when you will be doing things that deplete your willpower.
- Plan as fully as possible into the future, and schedule your day and week before the start of it, so you spend very little time using your willpower to think about what you “should” be doing. I ensure that every Sunday or Monday my week is fully scheduled with everything I can possibly plan for, and that I am planned out two to three months as much as I can.
- Capture things as soon as possible that enter your brain that cannot be done now and put them on a list or in your calendar to be filed in a list later. If my mind wanders and starts thinking about something to be done, I stop and get it out of my head as fast as possible. Stop using your memory for things – it depletes your willpower.
- Notice if you are losing focus or “feeling” drained and if possible stop and deal with your lack of mental resources. If I can't, I will push through, but often look ahead in my day and see what I can do to change some things or rearrange things so I can replenish my stores.
- Do some form of movement and activity first thing in the morning to charge up your brain and body, and when you have the most willpower. This is a habit that I have formed over many years, and I recommend getting this into your daily routine.
- Apply the healthy mind platter (davidrock.net) and the seven cognitive activities for managing a healthy mind.
- Be mindful of things people are requesting, asking, or activities you are about to do that may unnecessarily use your willpower. I am mindful and constantly aware of things that may use my willpower.
- Practice putting things back in their place after use and keep things neat and tidy around you as much as possible

In today's highly mentally demanding world, it works to look at what you are using your willpower for and how you manage it to give yourself an improvement and edge on your performance and productivity.

WE ARE A BRAIN-POWERED ECONOMY

“There is less time available for more tasks and responsibilities. Since time is a scarce resource, those skilled in (re-)focusing quickly and staying focused within fragments of time will thrive and be more successful. This requires the capacity to manage one's attention: to focus entirely on the person or task at hand while also exerting self-control to block out interferences.”

David Rock et al. 2012 – *The Healthy Mind Platter*.

No matter what you want to achieve, you must remember:

- We are under much more strain than our ancestors.
- Your supply of willpower (self-control) is limited, and you use the same resource for many different things – make sure you regularly renew and replenish it.
- What matters is the exertion, not the outcome. Resisting temptation or giving in both depletes the resource.
- Watch what you use your willpower for!

“Willpower evolved because it was crucial for our ancestors to get along with the rest of the clan, and it's still serving that purpose today. Inner discipline still leads to outer kindness...“Willpower is the virtue that sets our species apart, and that makes each one of us strong.” – Baumeister and Tierney, 2011. [\[2\]](#)

Drew Knowles is a Mind Coach who trains and coaches ambitious, successful business professionals to manage their mind and deal with stress to improve their performance, productivity and overall wellness. www.drewknowles.com