

The Science of Self-Control

Achieve better health by tapping into your limited resource of self-control.

BY JOANN MILIVOJEVIC

DON'T OVEREAT, GET DAILY EXERCISE, STOP SMOKING – THOSE are just a few of the common health messages that bombard us every day. But what does it really take to create and maintain a healthy lifestyle? The bottom line on any strategy is self-control. New research exposes what may thwart self-control, and experts chime in to explain how we can overcome some common self-sabotaging behaviors.

FAILING TO SUCCEED

Experts agree that behavior change is difficult. It takes extended, concerted effort. And you're more likely to succeed in changing your behavior if you think of it as learning how to do something new. A natural part of the learning process is failure. We should, in fact, expect to fail sometimes. When you learned to ride a bike, for example, you didn't pedal perfectly down the block on the very first try. Chances are you kept at it until riding that bike became second nature. So it is with a healthy lifestyle. At first you don't automatically succeed.

While failure can be the pathway to success, it's what you do with failure that's critical, according to Greg Petersen, Ph.D., health psychologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Like learning to ride a bike, he says, each fall or bobble provides you with

information. Use it to adjust your reactions and you eventually smooth out the ride.

Unfortunately, we often beat ourselves up instead of self-correcting. We say things like: "I blew it. I can never do this," or "It's too hard." Negative self-talk undermines self-control. Replace that self-defeating behavior with a cognitive shift, recommends Dr. Petersen. Ask: "What happened? Is there anything I can do about this right now? How can I prevent this from happening in the future?"

In other words, how can you control yourself better?

MANAGING YOUR RESOURCES

Knowing more about the psychology of self-control can help you more effectively manage your wellness strategy. Intriguing new research suggests that self-control is a limited resource. Researchers from Yale University and the University of California, Los Angeles, examined what happens when we live vicariously through other people's experiences. They discovered that how you observe the actions of other people can either deplete or boost your self-control.

The researchers presented study participants with a story about a hungry waiter who was surrounded by delicious food. He didn't eat the food because if he did, he'd be fired. Half the participants were told

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« Negative self-talk and focusing on only the outcome of a goal undermines self-control and achievement.

to simply read the story. The other half were told to imagine themselves as the waiter and how it would feel to be in that difficult situation. Researchers then ranked participants' abilities to exert self-control in various tasks. Those who closely identified with the waiter had less self-control compared to those who had psychological separation from the waiter. These findings suggest that self-control can be worn out simply by over-identifying with another person who is acting with extreme self-control; for example, getting too caught up with characters in "The Biggest Loser" TV show. If, however, we maintain some psychological separation, we'll have better control over our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Knowing that self-control can be a limited resource, researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Hong Kong wanted to understand more about this "depletion effect" in the context of consumer health. They investigated how health messages affect self-control. In their studies, the authors examined how people processed repeated self-control challenges. After participants faced a self-control challenge in which they focused on their lack of resources - such as their

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feelings of tiredness – they were less likely to have the resolve for health-related activities, such as exercising or flossing. But when they focused on the future and linked the health task to important long-term goals, they didn't feel depleted.

But simply having long-term goals isn't enough. If it were the magic bullet, we'd all have hit the bull's-eye by now. As it turns out, both how we view and how we approach long-term goals can make all the difference between making the mark and not.

LIVING IN THE NOW

David Coppel, Ph.D., is a clinical sports psychologist at Harborview Medical Center at the University of Washington School of Medicine. His work with high-performance athletes helps reveal how to effectively use

long-term goals. Thinking only about the outcome, he cautions, won't get the job done.

“If you put pressure only on outcome, you'll feel more anxious,” explains Dr. Coppel. “Anxiety is created by ‘what if’ kind of thinking, and that doesn't help. Most athletes and high performers try to reduce ‘what ifs’ over time to focus on what needs to be done now.”

To be successful, you need both a present-mind focus and goals, according to Dr. Coppel. Goals provide motivation; focusing on the now provides you with a to-do list. High performers have a clear idea of what they need to do to achieve a goal. For athletes, that means training every day, being on time for training sessions and learning how to deal with distractions. They also are very good at acknowledging failure and quickly self-correcting. “They can't be bothered by the emotion of

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falling off the wagon,” emphasizes Dr. Coppel. “Instead, they refocus on getting back on the wagon.”

How you think about your goal is also vital, he says. You have to believe it’s really possible. And that may mean a shift in your point of view. For example, it’s not uncommon for people on a diet to succumb to temptation at night. After eating healthfully all day long there may be a sense of deprivation. *I deserve that ice cream after depriving myself all day!* Instead of feeling deprived, suggests Dr. Coppel, congratulate yourself for a day of healthy choices and treat yourself in some other way.

SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Focusing on day-by-day processes and acknowledging your successes in a tangible way are two self-control strategies recommended by Leslie Heinberg, Ph.D., director of behavioral services for the Cleveland Clinic Bariatric and Metabolic Institute. She helps people achieve long-term goals by breaking them down into daily actions.

“It’s too vague to say, I’m going to get in shape,” says Dr. Heinberg. “Instead say, ‘This week I am going to take a 30-minute walk after dinner for four nights. If I do that, I’m going to reward myself with a movie night, or give myself 10 downloads for my iPod.’”

Your environment can make a huge difference in reaching your goals. It’s a lot easier to have self-control over eating cookies when those cookies are still at the

grocery store versus on the kitchen counter. Likewise, it’s easier to maintain appropriate portion size when you don’t overload your plate or have large bowls of pasta in the middle of the dinner table.

Also, consider the company you keep. The people we eat with can affect our behaviors. A recent study from the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California suggests that if your friends are overweight, you’ll tend to be overweight.

Knowing that self-control is a limited resource can help you create a more realistic game plan for healthy living. Set yourself up for success by limiting your exposure to the places and people who may trigger unhealthy behaviors. When you do fall off the wagon, discover why so you can make different choices in the future. And don’t forget to leave the cookies and fatty snacks at the store. ❄

POINTS OF CONTACT

- » For a physician referral, call 1-800-4BAYLOR or visit www.BaylorHealth.com.
- » To learn more about controlling your weight, visit win.niddk.nih.gov.
- » Find out how much physical activity you need to stay healthy by visiting www.cdc.gov and searching for “physical activity for everyone.”