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# Understanding Willpower: Make it work for you

Tina Hallis, Ph.D.  
The Positive Edge, LLC

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## Why bother to understand willpower?

According to Roy F. Baumeister, Professor of Psychology at Florida State University and one of the leading researchers in this area, “improving willpower is the surest way to a better life.” A pretty strong statement, don’t you think? But consider this – the two human traits that consistently predict success in life (happy family, good friends, satisfying career, good health, etc) are intelligence and self-control (willpower).

Doubtful? As early as age 4, our level of willpower can correlate to our success as an adult. One study asked 4 year olds if they wanted to have a marshmallow now or would like to wait awhile (15 minutes) and get two marshmallows. Those who opted for the instant gratification were found to have lower grades in school, higher rates of divorce, lower salaries, more problems with drug abuse and be more prone to gain weight in middle age. Another study found that the ONLY personality trait that correlated with a college student’s GPA was self-control.

OK. So willpower is important for our quality of life. Let’s take a closer look at what it is. Psychologists describe it as the ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals; and the capacity to override an unwanted thought, feeling or impulse.

Unfortunately, willpower is a limited resource. When we run low, we are more likely to give in to that temptation or act on that impulse. Couldn’t resist that chocolate cake or buying that cool pair of shoes? What about the time you found yourself losing your patience and yelling at your kid or partner? Think back – did something happen earlier that required your self-control? Not only that, willpower uses up glucose in our brains, and when we run low, it causes us to crave sweets. Hmmm. That explains a lot!

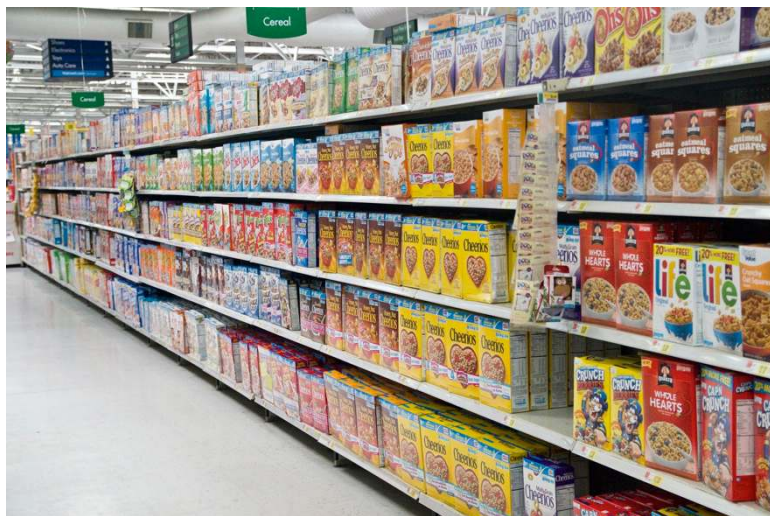


## Willpower and decisions.



Another daily process that can drain our willpower and that may surprise you is - *making decisions*. Choices are an important part of our happiness; however, we can reach a point of saturation where too many choices actually makes it harder to decide, causing us to waste time and energy and sometimes

causing us to avoid making the decision altogether! When we make a decision, we are eliminating other options and as humans, we really like to keep our options open. So it requires willpower to make the choice and limit ourselves. Maybe you're like me (and many others) and have a hard time deleting emails. I often think, "What if I want to go back (some day) and look at this message again?" Studies show that even deciding to delete an email depletes our willpower, leading to "decision fatigue" which drains our energy and hurts our wellbeing.



In today's world we have more choices than ever-before, from the type of cereal we buy to the features we want on our car. So what can we do? We can remember that having many options doesn't mean we need to spend more time filtering through to find the best, but instead there are many choices that are "good enough." Once we make a

choice, we need to move on and not second-guess ourselves. We can try to avoid putting ourselves in situations that require us to make many decisions around the same time. We can also prepare ourselves when we know we have many decisions to make (ex. picking out the perfect carpet for the living room!) by being well rested, relaxed, and having eaten a healthy meal ahead of time. You may laugh at the mention of food, but when our brains are busy trying to make choices, they quickly use up the available glucose. When we are hungry, we not only end up grumpy and stressed – we may regret our decisions.

### How can we maximize our willpower?



As mentioned above, when we are tired and hungry, we tend to have less willpower and it takes longer to replenish. Studies also indicate that over the long term, exercise and reducing our levels of stress may improve our self-control. So taking good care of ourselves is an important step to maximize our willpower. In addition, studies suggest practicing willpower in one part of our life may help it grow and show up in other areas. For example, when people who wanted to improve their physical fitness were

given a gym membership and scheduled and recorded their workouts, they not only became more fit, they also cut down on impulsive spending, kept their homes cleaner, procrastinated less, and ate less junk food. Similar results were seen for people who wanted to save money when they created a detailed budget and tracked how much they spent.

In order to practice (and potentially build) our self-control, it's helpful to pick a change that is challenging, but also one we can stick to. Research shows that we are more likely to succeed when we see the benefit and it aligns with our values. Our chances of sticking to our goal are related to how passionate we are about making the change and inversely related to how difficult we think it is going to be.

When we successfully achieve a goal, it has a large effect on how we view ourselves. There is an interesting area of psychology called “self-perception theory” that says how we behave impacts our attitude about ourselves. If we see ourselves using our willpower to accomplish a challenging goal, we are more likely to believe that we are the kind of person who has enough willpower to succeed at difficult goals. And the opposite is true – when we see ourselves being lazy and not getting anything done . . . well, you get the picture.



Of course, the other important factor that science has repeatedly found is that we are all different, and what works for one person might not work for someone else. So the best bet is for each of us to run our own experiment and see what happens. Also, just knowing and understanding the influence of willpower can help us in our daily lives. We should plan ahead when we can and give ourselves a break when we can't (and our empty willpower tank has left us feeling frustrated and maybe a little grumpy).

For more information, check out the book, *Willpower* by Roy Baumeister and John Tierney.