

Willpower – Got to Have It!

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Show video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz1pnFBLZM4&feature=youtu.be>

The children are really cute. They will be a hard act to follow.

So the marshmallow test was a ground breaking experiment done back in the sixties. It has been replicated and modified countless times. The video was not of an actual experiment but it serves the purpose of introduction. In the actual experiment the children had the one marshmallow and the other marshmallow as well on separate plates on the table in front of them. The experimenters had already developed a trusting relationship with the children. The children were given choices of which treat they wanted. The researchers were trying to control for other factors that might impact their results.

Walter Mischel was a young psychologist at Stanford University at the time he devised this experiment. The purpose of the test was to explore the strategies children might use to resist the temptation of eating the one treat so they could secure both treats. The results were that children who were more successful in resisting temptation engaged in distracting techniques to take their mind off the marshmallow or chocolate in front of them. It was considered a success just on that basis. The experiment took on a much more significance when Mischel explored unanticipated follow up research.

His young daughters had been students at the same school at the university preschool that the experimental subjects had attended. His daughters would have conversations with him about their former fellow students who were now adults. He noticed that the students who had done better on delaying gratification seemed to be doing better now as adults. He sent his research team out to interview as many of the former subjects now. The results confirmed his hypothesis. The children who were able to wait the longest were more likely to have positive life outcomes. Those that did not resist the temptation for long were more likely to have poor academic outcomes and social problems like drug abuse. It seemed that self control or will power was a strong predictor of positive outcomes.

This was stunning as there are very few early attributes or circumstance other intelligence, trauma and malnutrition that have a high correlation to future self attributes. The hope was and still is that this personal attribute is subject to nurture and not solely nature. Much psychology research has been devoted this question. If will power, self control, self regulation can be developed and strengthened then there is hope that people and children in particular can be given the assistance needed to fortify this important attribute. It is the subject of much of health science today for disease prevention.

Most of the information for this talk has been gleamed from the 2011 book, Willpower, by psychologist Roy Baumeister and science writer, John Tierney. It is a nonacademic book and was a New York Times Best Seller. I read the book shortly after it came out along with another best seller around that time, Unbroken, by Laurie Hillenbrand. Unbroken is the life story of Louie Zamperini. He had survived 47 days in an open life raft in the Pacific Ocean and then was imprisoned and endured great hardship and abuse at the hands of a sadistic prison guard during WWII. I mention this because his ordeal was a supreme test of strength and endurance of the will to live. I revisited these books recently to prepare for this talk but also because it was time for me to take a second helping of the ideas and inspiration they contain. I will leave the books in the lending library for a time if anyone who like to read them.

The research on willpower is really much too plentiful and involved to discuss with any great detail here. I lack true grasp of its intricacies as well. However, the author, Roy Baumeister could be described as the dean of the research pertaining to the concept of willpower. I will do my best to make short but coherent summary of the important points. In researching the history of the concept of willpower he traces it back the Victorian era. The Victorians were suffering from the breakdown of religious mores while at the same time facing more and more temptations with the advent of prosperity. There were a lot of self help books on the subject encouraging people to buck up and keep a stiff upper lip and all that; right you are. Baumeister found that Freud was the first to describe the self, or the ego, as requiring energy. This energy was said to be involved with the mental processes that the self depends on. Baumeister had found that willpower did indeed seem like a mental energy. He goes on to refer to the weakening of will power or self control as ego depletion in acknowledgment to Freud's insight. This was in contrast to the post Freud

model of the mind as working like an informational processing system. Baumeister refers to it instead as a biological model in which energy plays a vital part.

Through series of inventive and often devious experiments this group of psychologists divines the attributes of humans and other animals regarding self control and self awareness as it relates to willpower. In what has come to be known as the Radish Experiment four different experimental groups of fasting subjects, college students of course, are asked to wait individually in a room with plates of chocolate chip cookies, candy and raw radishes. One group is given permission to eat the cookies, another the candy and another group is given permission to eat only the raw radishes while waiting for the experiment to begin. The fourth group are told they can't eat anything at all. After waiting the subjects go into another room where they are asked to solve a geometric puzzle. The puzzle has no solution. The purpose is to see how long the subjects work at the puzzle before they give up. All groups of subjects except the radish-only group had an average time of around 20 minutes before giving up. The radish group averages around 8 minutes. Clearly the task of resisting the temptation of eating the cookies or candy depleted their endurance with the puzzle. Also, willpower was shown to be limited, subject to different conditions and measurable.

To touch upon some of what they found: The researchers identified and tested four broad categories of willpower- the power to control thoughts, to control emotions, to control impulses and what they called performance control. This control involves enduring hardship and making decisions. They learned that we ration our reserve of willpower based on expectations. They devised experiments where subjects were given a boost or drop of willpower based on control factors. They would move the finish line forwards or backwards so to speak changing the expectation of difficulty sometimes in mid-experiment. Researchers have learned glucose is what powers willpower. On the social side when we see ourselves in a mirror we are more likely to stand up to a bully, work harder, are less likely to steal, and more likely to follow our inner values. When glucose is unavailable to the brain our willpower is weakened. We make decisions that are the easy way out, that give us more options or put off the decision when our glucose is depleted. We are more impulsive and lack emotional control when glucose is depleted.

Willpower can grow stronger over time. A discipline in one area spills over into other areas. Strength of willpower is not affected as much as endurance.

They learned that while willpower is important in emergencies and dire circumstances such as in Louie Zamperini's extreme case it is equally if not more important in how it helps us regulate our daily lives to our benefit and the benefit of others. Baumeister theorizes that the evolutionary pressure to develop willpower was to manage social situations. In order to thrive in a social group, animals must be able to regulate their own behavior. Researchers have explored how gratitude, generosity and kindness positively impact our willpower. Higher level thinking and focusing on the future increases self control. Religion, a belief in a higher power, something greater than ourselves and/or enduring ideals all seem to fortify our willpower.

Now for some advice- all based on research and gleaned from Baumeister book. Paradoxically you need willpower to manage and strengthen willpower. But you got that. Best wishes.

It is best if you have social support. The support and opinion of others motivates. Avoid temptation if able. It wears down our reserves.

Set up roadblocks to temptation. Lash yourself to the mast like Odyssey. Or give your keys to a friend.

Public commitments such as marriage vows before family and friends is the old fashioned way to put social pressure to stay the course. You can also use social media and electronic technology to support and monitor goals. The possibility and subsequent avoidance of shame can be effective or lost of prize money. Money motivates.

Use Fitbit to promote walking; Tracking progress helps. Share results with others.

Monitoring helps everything. Techno companies are promoting all kinds of programs. Mint.com is a very successful example. Diabetes monitoring is being revolutionized through technology.

Motivation is key. Find your motivation and use it to reward and possibly punish. I know, bad word, bad word. Put money that you would have spent on cigarettes in secure place where you can't retrieve it; if you relapse the money goes to charity if you succeed you buy yourself special. Better yet, if you relapse you the money goes to an anti-charity. Let's say to a politician you detest. Shown to work.

Eat well to feed your brain. It needs a steady, stable supply of glucose. Manage diabetes, hypoglycemia and sugar intake. Eat balance of protein, healthy fats, whole grain, vegetables and raw fruit. A Sugar high begets a sugar low. Juvenile correlational facility substituted healthy alternatives to processed carbs and sugar, which was followed by a reduction in escape attempts and violence.

Get plenty of sleep; said to be even more important than what you eat. Deprivation impairs the processing of sugar. It also increases likelihood of unethical behavior. Yep, that's what the research says. A strong cup of coffee doesn't make up for lack of sleep. Neither does a full night of sleep the next night.

Don't overestimate your self control. In a weakened condition everyone is vulnerable.

Stay home when you are sick. Your immune system uses up a lot of energy.

Focus on one self improvement project at a time. Limited supply, remember.

Did I say develop good habits. Change routine. When positive choices become habits they no longer deplete willpower they increase will power. There is one source for willpower for all needs.

A neat and orderly environment increases willpower- Sorry, mom for all that grief-

A neat appearance, also; along with good hygiene. Jeez. Mom, I should have listened.

Proper use of lists help. Short with priorities only. Medium time frame is most effective. Read up on this if it appeals. Can be misused, also. As can most anything.

Make any major decision with a full supply of will power. Well fed and rested brain.

Watch out for sales techniques designed to wear you down so you make expensive decision when not at your peak. It is a tricky strategy as you are more likely to walk out with a no sale if you get too depleted. Make tough decisions first when fresh than decide what shade of grey the carpet will be. A non decision is easier for our ego when feeling drained.

If you go before a judge at the end of the day, pray. They are glucose low and ego depleted so much more likely to say no. Our default answer when we are low on energy.

Don't pressure a decision from someone who is depleted unless you want the answer to be "no".

It is easier to procrastinate than make a decision. It takes more energy to decide.

Being a tightwad is more common than being a spendthrift. Don't constantly deny yourself happiness by putting off play and pleasure. Play replenishes willpower as well with a healthy snack.

Motivation matters. I already said that but when something we want to accomplish has meaning to us we are more likely to invest our self into it. You can start using your left hand instead of your right for a limited part of the day and strengthen your willpower, that is, if you are right hand dominant. Does that matter enough to you that you will stick with it? It might be fun but not for me. Find something, one thing you want to develop as a consistent life long habit. Or not.

Play offense. Watch for symptoms of depleted willpower. Pick you battles. Stop and reflect and put things in perspective. Look at past accomplishments and imagine your future self accomplishing new objectives.

Take baby steps, transformation takes time. The tortoise won the race.

Make a plan of something you are thinking about in the future; does not need a lot of details; then set it aside until ready to act. Completing a plan relieves the unconscious from having to bring it up over and over again.

I hope this was helpful to you. It was to me. I have a plan to get more sleep.

Ask me how I am doing from time to time on my goal.