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# Facts For You

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## SELF-CONTROL



The ability to regulate one's emotions and behavior allows an individual to plan, monitor, and attain goals. There is debate surrounding the degree to which self-control is an innate individual difference, versus a learned skill. Most experts believe that people who are disposed to lower levels of less self-control can still cultivate healthy habits and take counter-measures to control their behavior.

### **What is self control?**

Self-control is an ability to regulate and alter your responses to avoid undesirable behaviors, increase desirable ones, and achieve long-term goals. In other words, self-control is being able to choose the thing you should do over the thing you want to do.

Research has shown that possessing self-control can be important for health and well-being. Psychologists typically define self-control as:

- The ability to control behaviors to avoid temptations and achieve goals
- The ability to delay gratification and resist unwanted behaviors or urges
- A limited resource that can be depleted

People use various terms for self-control, including discipline, determination, grit, willpower, and fortitude. Some researchers believe that self-control is partly determined by genetics, but it is also a skill you can strengthen with practice.

Self-control is one aspect of executive function, a set of abilities that helps people to plan, monitor, and achieve their goals. People with attention-deficit attention disorder (ADHD) often have characteristics linked to problems with executive function.

### **Importance of Self-Control**

How important is self-control in your day-to-day life? 'A Stress in America', survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that 27% of respondents identified a lack of willpower as the primary factor keeping them from reaching their goals.

The majority of people surveyed (71%) believed that self-control can be both learned and strengthened. Researchers have found that people who have better self-control tend to be healthier and happier, both in the short term and in the long term.

The benefits of self-control are not limited to academic performance. One long-term health study found that high levels of self-control during childhood predicted greater cardiovascular, respiratory, and dental health in adulthood, as well as improved financial status.

One of the dominant theories of self-control at present is the limited-resource model. This model suggests that when we exert self-control, our mental energy can become depleted. In this perspective, self-control is a lot like a muscle. When we overwork a muscle it becomes fatigued and can't produce the same level of exertion of which it was previously capable. Similarly, just as exercising a muscle increases strength, exercising self-control can increase your ability to override impulses in the future.

Self-control is more challenging for some than it is for others. People with ADHD, for example, have a harder time controlling their impulses than normally developed individuals. Personality, life experience, and motivation also influence our capacity for self-control (de Ridder et al., 2012). Some studies have even shown differences in brain structure and function in people with poor self-control compared to those with good self-control.

### **Signs of Too Much Self-Control**

The ability to remain in control of one's emotions desires and actions is usually a quality that people admire. However, when someone possesses too much self-control, they can struggle. Sometimes, people suffering from excessive self-control come off as perfectionists or seem overbearing. Experts call this behavior "over control." Someone dealing with "over control" might experience the following:

- Difficulty in relaxing
- Distance toward others
- Rigid personality
- Overly focused on details
- Lack of feelings or display of feelings
- Being responsible (to a fault)
- Avoidance of risk

In general, people with too much self-control don't stand out as much as those who lack self-control. Why? Because their behavior is often associated with positive words or characteristics, like hard-working, introverted, or highly sensible. With that in mind, how do we know if someone has too much self-control or is simply mature? Well, it depends on the individual.

If someone's behavior works for them and causes little to no distress, it's likely that everything is fine. However, if excessive self-control makes their physical, mental, emotional, or social life a challenge, they may benefit from seeing a licensed counsellor.

### **Signs of Too Little Self-Control**

Someone who lacks self-control is easy to spot. They generally have difficulty committing to positive habits, and they may not be able to regulate their feelings or actions as well as their peers. Signs of low self-control could be:

- Little or no self-discipline
- Lack of goals or inability to reach goals
- Low motivation
- Little to no willpower
- Difficulty controlling emotions
- Lack of attention
- Quick to blame others
- Difficulty maintaining friendships
- Dangerous or overly-passive lifestyle

Having little self-control (or none at all) has a major impact on one's day-to-day life. Not only is it difficult to build self-confidence, but it's also hard to work with others and reach goals. If someone runs into the same obstacles over and over again, they may need to work on self-control. Similarly, if they seem to lack direction or appear immature, too little self-control might be the cause.

### **Self-Control Examples**

Self-control ability can manifest in our lives in a variety of forms. Here are a few examples of the domains in which self-control plays a huge role:

- Emotional regulation
- Perseverance
- Learning
- Critical thinking
- Positive self-talk
- Healthy eating
- Grit
- Exercise habits
- Empathy
- Healthy sleeping habits
- Responsible consumption of alcohol
- Forgiving yourself and forgiving others
- Self-esteem
- Interpersonal communication
- Academic success

### **Self-Control Skills**

Though different models of self-control consider self-control to be comprised of different skills, monitoring and delay of gratification seem to be among the most consistent.

- **Monitoring**

Monitoring is essentially being aware of your behavior. It's the moments when you say to yourself "this isn't what you should be doing right now." Often, when our self-control energy is depleted, we are still fully capable of recognizing that our behavior is out of line with our personal goals or our values, but we just aren't able to act on it.

- **Delay of Gratification**

Delay of gratification is choosing a more favourable future outcome than a less favourable immediate outcome. For example, you might be familiar with the famous "Marshmallow Study" in which elementary school students were presented with a

single marshmallow and were told that they could either eat one marshmallow now or several marshmallows if they waited 15 minutes. Choosing to wait for more marshmallows later, means delaying the gratification of consuming one delicious marshmallow now.

- **Opposite of Self-Control**

The opposite of self-control is impulsivity. Impulsivity is the tendency to engage in behaviors motivated by the desire for pleasure, gratification, or arousal without mindful intention, forethought, or consideration of potential consequences (Hollander & Rosen, 2000). Poor impulse control can have many undesirable outcomes including overeating, alcohol and drug abuse, crime, aggression and violence, overspending, risky sexual behaviors.

### **Can Self Control Be Learned?**

The ability to control our behavior is essential for achieving long-term goals and life satisfaction. Luckily for all of us who are not naturally gifted when it comes to self-control, it's an ability that can be learned.

Research suggests that practicing self-control of any kind can improve your ability to override urges of any kind. For example, one study showed that participants who avoided sweets for 2 weeks demonstrated improvements in self-control on a completely unrelated task.

Here are a few simple and scientifically validated ways to practice self-control:

- **Improve your posture** – Depending on the current state of your typical posture, this task may be more or less challenging. Remember, self-control is a limited resource, so if improving your posture is going to be particularly difficult for you, you might want to try practicing good posture for a limited period of time every day (i.e. 'I'm going to maintain good posture for the first hour of my day').
- **Alter verbal behavior** – This might be swearing less, speaking in complete and grammatically correct sentences, or avoiding particular words. For example, a dear friend of mine tried to avoid using the word "thing" for a month.
- **Use your non-dominant hand for simple tasks** – This is a great way to exercise self-control and monitoring. For a specified period of time (i.e. between 10 am and 9 pm) use your non-dominant hand (if you have one) for simple things like opening your water bottle or brushing your teeth.
- **Squeeze a handgrip for as long as possible** – This task doesn't require as much monitoring, so it might feel a bit simpler to implement than the other exercises. In squeezing a handgrip for as long as possible, you are exercising self-control by overcoming physical discomfort and suppressing the desire to let go.

## How to Have Self-Control

Researchers have identified a multitude of different ways to facilitate exercising self-control. Here are a few scientifically backed methods for self-control:

- **Psychological distancing**

Research suggests that we are more strongly compelled by temptations when they are readily available. Creating distance between you and the temptation you want to overcome can reduce the strength of the temptation. For example, I struggle with compulsively checking my social media app. To help me control the behavior, I turned off all notifications and removed the app from my home screen. That way I know my attention won't be drawn to it every time I unlock my cell phone. Additionally, to access it I first have to navigate to a different screen, giving me just enough time to recognize the behavior and choose the appropriate course of action.

- **Implementation intentions**

An implementation intention is essentially an if/then conditional applied to behaviors you are trying to encourage. For example, "if I get home from work before 9, then I will meditate." This reduces the energetic cost of convincing yourself to meditate when you get home from work and precludes the need to argue with yourself about it because the decision is already made.

- **Temptation bundling**

This refers to combining the thing you want to do with the thing you know you should do. For example, imagine a scenario in which you really want to watch mindless television, but you feel like you should work out. You could bundle the temptation by saying "I can watch 'Kaun Banega Crorepati', but only while I'm on the exercise bike." This provides both the immediate gratification you were seeking from watching television and the satisfaction of behaving in accordance with your long-term goal of fitness.

- **Write out your goals and values**

By formalizing your **goals** and **values** in writing, you redirect your energy and attention toward the desired behaviors. Having a set reference point also provides additional motivation because the sense of loss that would accompany failing to achieve your goal or live up to your values is more salient than any immediate gain.

## Tips on Self-Control

As you are on your journey to achieve greater self-control, there are a few things to keep in mind that might help.

- **Try not to make decisions when you are angry, frustrated, or fatigued.** For example, if you are frustrated with a friend, wait until you're calm and rested before talking to them about the issue.

- **Spread out important decisions over several days.** We know that decision-making can deplete self-control energy, which means that the more decisions you make at a time, the more likely you are to make a bad one. It might be helpful to give yourself time and rest between important decisions if possible.
- **Monitor yourself more.** It's hard to exert self-control over behaviors of which we aren't totally aware. Keeping a close watch on your spending by checking your bank account more regularly or recording your behavior over the course of a day in a journal might give you a better sense of when you are actually engaging in the undesirable behavior, leaving you more opportunities to correct it in the future.
- **Get some glucose.** Our brains require glucose for energy. Giving your body more glucose (having a piece of fruit for example) when you feel mentally fatigued may help provide enough energy to help you exert more self-control.
- **Avoid triggering situations.** There are some situations that we know provoke unwanted behaviors. A triggering situation could be a place, a person, an event, a smell, etc. For example, many cigarette smokers feel a strong desire to smoke when they are at a bar. By avoiding bars, they reduce the likelihood that they will feel compelled to smoke and reduce the need for self-control.
- **Become a mental energy accountant.** Dr. C. Nathan DeWall at the University of Kentucky suggests making a list of everything you need to do each day and assigning each activity a score that indicates how much self-control it will require. By taking stock of the amount of self-control you will need for various activities throughout your day you will be better able to spend your mental energy more judiciously.

### **Final Thoughts on Self-Control**

Our ability to control ourselves has a far-reaching impact on nearly all aspects of our lives. Self-control affects our health, finances, intellect, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. Though the capacity to govern ourselves in accordance with our values and long-term goals doesn't always come easily and, for some of us, can feel nearly impossible, it is possible to improve. Learning how to practice self-control can help us become masters of our own destinies.

**(Reference:** Internet Resources)

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