

Thinking Abstractly May Help to Boost Self-Control

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Many of the long term goals people strive for — like losing weight — require us to use self-control and forgo immediate gratification. And yet denying our immediate desires in order to reap future benefits is often very hard to do.

In a new article in the August issue of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), researchers Kentaro Fujita and Jessica Carnevale of The Ohio State University propose that the way people subjectively understand, or construe, events can influence self-control.

Research from psychological science suggests that categorizing things abstractly into broad categories (called high-level construal) allows us to psychologically distance ourselves from the pushes and pulls of the immediate moment. This, in turn, makes us more sensitive to the broad implications of our behavior and leads us to show greater consistency between our values and our behavior.

For example, a dieter choosing based on immediately apparent differences between the choices (low-level construal) might focus on taste and opt for a candy bar over an apple. A dieter choosing on the basis of high-level construal, however, might view the choice in the broader terms of a choice between weight loss and hedonism, and opt for the apple.

The researchers draw together many strands of research to provide evidence for the role of these

different kinds of construal in decisions involving self-control. They argue that research investigating the link between construal level and self-control is important and timely as some of the most pressing societal problems – including obesity, addiction, debt – are associated with failures of self-control.