

You Wear Me Out: Thinking of others causes lapses in our self-control

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Exerting self-control is exhausting. In fact, using self-control in one situation impairs our ability to use self-control in subsequent, even unrelated, situations. What about thinking of other people exerting self-control? Earlier research has shown that imagining other people's actions can cause the same reactions as if we were actually performing them (e.g., simulating eating a disgusting food results in a revolting face, even if no food has been eaten) and psychologists Joshua M. Ackerman and John A. Bargh from Yale University, along with Noah J. Goldstein and Jenessa R. Shapiro from the University of California, Los Angeles explored what affect thinking about other people's self-control has on our own thoughts and behavior.

Participants were presented with a story about a hungry waiter who was surrounded by delicious food, but was not allowed to sample any, for fear of being fired. Half of the participants simply read the story and the other half were told to imagine themselves in the waiter's shoes. Next, all of the participants were shown images of mid- to high-priced items (e.g. cars and TVs) and were to indicate how much they would pay for them. In a follow-up experiment, some of the participants read the same story and others read a similar story where the waiter managed to sneak some food for himself. Just as in the first experiment, some of the participants read the story while other imagined themselves as the waiter. All of these volunteers then participated in a word game and a memory task.

The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that the participants who imagined themselves in the waiter's position were more willing to spend greater amounts of money on the luxury items.—they had exhausted their capacity for self-control and restraint, leading them to spend more money. In the follow-up experiment, the volunteers who read and imagined the story where the waiter managed to sneak the food performed much better on the word game and memory task. Overall, the group that imagined themselves as the waiter from the original story, who exercised self-control and did not eat any food, performed the worst on the word game and memory tasks.

These findings suggest that our own self-control can be worn out simply by mentally simulating another person acting with self-control. The authors note , for example, that imagining someone else's self-control “could result in small breakdowns of self-control, such as employees speaking out improperly during a meeting, to catastrophic ones, such as police officers responding to an emotionally charged encounter with deadly force.”