When it comes to weight loss, bad habits die hard

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On a recent doctor's visit, a compelling health video was looping in the reception room. It incorporated many of the accepted rules for achieving a healthy weight. The motivational video, tailored to the doctor's clientele, illustrated simple ways to eat more fruits and vegetables and get exercise. It was striking, however, that many of the nursing staff, who must have heard this video a thousand times, didn't seem to have taken it to heart. Nurses, as a national study revealed, are just as likely to overeat as the rest of the population.

How to explain this puzzle, in which the expert professionals who most intimately understand the health risks of being overweight subject themselves to these risks?

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We also can cue healthy behaviors on our own. Brian Wansink at Cornell University has shown, for example, that healthful eating can be as simple as buying smaller plates, forks, and spoons, so that we serve and eat hundreds fewer calories at each meal. Research we've done shows that simply using your non-dominant hand to snack is sufficient to block mindless eating habits and put the conscious mind in charge of what and how much you consume.

Of course, bad habits die hard. Because they come to mind automatically, they are the default responses when people are distracted, tired, or drained of willpower. We wondered, would good habits be equally resilient?

To test good habits, we followed students for a semester, including during exams, to determine how they responded to pressure. When exams drained their willpower, students with unhealthy eating habits doubled down on consuming junk food like doughnuts for breakfast. But habitual oatmeal eaters also stuck to their healthful habits. They did not have the cognitive energy to disrupt them. The stress of daily life made them default to their better selves.

Read the whole story: *Los Angeles Times*