

Beyond Willpower: Strategies for Reducing Failures of Self-Control

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Nearly everyone at one time or another has engaged in overeating, excessive spending, procrastinating, or falling into other self-defeating behaviors. These behaviors reflect a failure of self-control — pursuing an option that is the most tempting right now instead of the option with longer-lasting value. Self-control failures have negative consequences for educational achievement, retirement savings, health, and well-being, and they're the focus of increasing attention by psychological scientists, policymakers, and philosophers. Perhaps the deep interest in failures of self-control stems from the fact that they persist even when we recognize them and vow to behave differently in the future.

In this issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (Volume 19, Issue 3), Angela L. Duckworth (Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania) and coauthors Katherine L. Milkman (Operations, Information and Decisions Department, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania), and David Laibson (Department of Economics, Harvard University) examine the research on different strategies to prevent self-control failures and propose a theoretical framework to organize these strategies. In hopes of inspiring research-supported policies and programs for reducing failures of self-control, the authors also summarize policy-relevant research and interventions.

The term *willpower* is frequently used to describe the capacity to directly suppress behaviors that are satisfying but ultimately self-defeating or harmful. However, *willpower* and strategies that prescribe it tend to be unsuccessful — for example, the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program, which encouraged students to “Just Say No” to drugs, has been shown to be ineffective. Thus, Duckworth and

colleagues propose a classification of strategies that go beyond willpower and seem more efficient at reducing self-control failures. They distinguish between strategies that target particular situations (situational strategies) and those that target one's mental representations of the situation and environment (cognitive strategies). Besides situational and cognitive, the strategies can also be divided into self-deployed, meaning deliberately implemented by the individual, or other-deployed — a product of policies and “nudges” that change our behavior without us even being aware of it.

Self-deployed situational strategies include the use of commitment devices to constrain future decisions or behaviors (e.g., delete a game from a smartphone to avoid wasting time playing that game in the future), temptation bundling, or coupling indulgent behaviors with self-controlled ones (e.g., watching mindless television shows while exercising), situation modification (i.e., intentionally eliminating tempting options), and behavior therapy (i.e., identifying the situations that reinforce the undesirable behavior and avoiding them). Self-deployed cognitive strategies include setting goals and deadlines, planning, self-monitoring one's behaviors, using mindfulness or nonjudgmental awareness of the present, increasing psychological distance from the tempting behavior, mentally contrasting positive and negative outcomes of a goal and then making a plan for implementing intentions, and cognitive therapy (i.e., identifying the mental states that underlie the undesirable behavior).

Other-deployed cognitive interventions typically initiated by policymakers, employers, or educators include the creation of descriptive norms, such as telling individuals that the majority of their peers engage in the desirable behavior. It also includes social labeling (i.e., prompting the individuals' social identity), encouraging individuals to envision themselves in the future, presenting together the possible options relevant to a decision, framing a decision as a “fresh start,” and preventing self-licensing (i.e., allowing oneself to make indulgent choices now in anticipation of future self-controlled choices that might never occur). Other-deployed situational interventions, instead of increasing self-control capacity, change the availability of options and include introducing hard paternalism (e.g., bans, taxes, fees), changing microenvironments (e.g., stores placing fruit and vegetables near the front to increase sales of produce), making the best option the default whenever possible, forcing individuals to make a choice by thinking about their options, and planning interruptions in the environment to avoid mindless overindulgences.

Situational strategies may be ideal for physical temptations that can be avoided, hidden, or made more difficult to access (e.g., junk food). However, for internal temptations (e.g., daydreaming, anger), cognitive strategies may be more relevant. Self-deployed strategies require more effort from the individual but, once mastered, may be applied across different domains. Other-deployed strategies do not build on the ability of individuals to exert self-control and may be easier for policymakers to implement. But they can also backfire. For example, telling individuals that the majority of their peers engage in a desirable behavior may fail to foster that behavior when social comparisons discourage motivation to change.

In sum, optimal strategies to decrease failures of self-control depend not only on their likelihood of success but also on how easy they are to implement; therefore, different behaviors and situations may require different strategies. Duckworth and colleagues highlight that, despite a large body of research on self-control, there is an urgent need for a cumulative and applied science of self-control that incorporates insights from psychological science and economics and addresses questions about efficacy, scalability, and cost-effectiveness of the different strategies.

Self-Control and Its Discontents: A Commentary on Duckworth, Milkman, and Laibson

By George Loewenstein, *Carnegie Mellon University*

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In an accompanying commentary, George Loewenstein, who established his career researching intertemporal choice and self-control, discusses the perils of viewing self-control as the source of outcomes that might have other major causes. Loewenstein, Professor of Economics and Psychology in the Social and Decision Sciences Department at Carnegie Mellon University and a leader in the field of behavioral economics, considers the classification of self-control strategies proposed by Duckworth and colleagues a possible foundation for future thinking about self-control and agrees with the need for moving beyond willpower to increase self-control. However, he warns that the article may give the impression that lack of self-control causes problems such as obesity or inadequate saving and that the reviewed strategies are the best solutions for those problems. While these problems might be mitigated by enhanced self-control, he argues, obesity seems to be primarily caused by growing income inequality, the relatively lower price of processed food, and the increasingly sedentary nature of work and leisure. Savings deficits can be attributed to growing income inequality but also to the increasing use of credit cards and “save for your own retirement” plans. Hence, if the major contributors to obesity and inadequate savings are not failures of self-control, thinking that self-control strategies could solve such issues risks blaming the victim. Moreover, the most effective policies for combating obesity and inadequate savings may remove the need for self-control and realign incentives so as not to exploit consumer weaknesses, Loewenstein argues.

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Dedication to Walter Mischel

by Valerie F. Reyna

([PDF](#), [HTML](#))