



THE IMPORTANCE OF WILLPOWER IN SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

The strength model of self-control assumes that all acts of self-control (e.g., emotion regulation, persistence) are empowered by a single global metaphorical strength that has limited capacity. This strength can become temporarily depleted after a primary self-control act, which, in turn, can impair performance in subsequent acts of self-control.

Keywords: Sport, Self-control, Self-regulation, Willpower, Emotion.

'Willpower is the key to success. Successful people strive no matter what they feel by applying their will to overcome apathy, doubt or fear.'

Dan Millman

Introduction

Willpower is not a new concept, but we still do not have widespread awareness as to how to nurture it. Many people have an intuitive sense of what this willpower is but lack the scientific knowledge to understand the forces that undermine it.

Willpower makes all the difference in the world. It is what stands behind most success stories. It is what helps us forge new habits and what keeps us on a chosen course no matter how difficult the road gets. It is what helps us resist distraction and lead a productive lifestyle.

People use different definitions to describe willpower, but some of the most common synonyms are: drive, determination, self-discipline, self-control, self-regulation, effortful control.

At the core of willpower is the ability to resist short-term temptations and desires in order to achieve long-term goals. It's the prevailing source of long-term satisfaction over instant gratification.

According to APA (American Psychological Association), most psychology researchers define willpower as:

- The ability to delay gratification and resist short-term temptations to meet long-term goals;
- The capacity to override an unwanted thought, feeling or impulse;
- The conscious, effortful regulation of the self, by the self;





- A limited resource capable of being depleted.
- The general idea linking these definitions is of a self-effortful regulating the self. Studies show that people scoring high on self-control are more apt at regulating behavioral, emotional and attention impulses to achieve long-term goals when compared to more impulsive individuals.

For most of us, when we think of willpower, the first things to pop to mind are the challenges that require us to resist temptation. How do we refuse that chocolate cake, the department store, the internet, that cigarette, or that after-work drink?

It is hard. We have trouble saying “no” when our bodies and senses are screaming yes.

Psychologist Kelly McGonigal calls this the “I won’t power.” McGonigal is a frequent lecturer at Stanford University and the author of “The Willpower Instinct.” In this latest text, she tackles the concept of self-control and why it matters.

According to her, saying “no” is just one part of what willpower is. But the other part of willpower is “saying yes” to the things you know will lead you closer to your goals. It’s the ability to do what you need to do, even if you don’t feel like it, or a part of you doesn’t want to follow through.

Most of us are aware of the importance of willpower, nevertheless, we’ll run through the findings of multiple studies on willpower.

Overall, self-control appears to be a better predictor of academic achievement than intelligence. It is also a stronger determinant of effective leadership than charisma and more important for marital satisfaction than empathy.

Anywhere you look at it, people with greater willpower are:

- Happier;
- Healthier;
- More satisfied in their relationships;
- Wealthier and further ahead in their careers;

More able to manage stress, deal with conflict and overcome adversity.

The point is this: we all have willpower and we all use it to some extent. But most of us would be closer to achieving all our goals if we focused on improving our willpower.

Historically, the psychological paradigm was that we had a “fixed brain,” meaning you were born a certain way and over time, your brain will decline. This is no longer what science reveals.

With modern technology and research, today’s neuroscientists know that the brain is responsive to experience—it actually changes based on what you do.





When you practice a certain behavior, you're strengthening the neural connections for that behavior, making it more accessible and more likely to occur.

Practice worrying, and you get better at worrying because the brain region associated with that will grow denser. Practice concentration and you'll also get better at it and your brain will respond accordingly.

You can also train your brain for better self-control and meditation is one of the best ways to do it. Why? Because meditation has a powerful effect on a wide range of skills that relate to self-control:

- Attention;
- Focus;
- Stress management;
- Impulse control;
- Self-awareness.

When you meditate you're training your mind to focus on a particular given point (your breath for example). Paying attention and observing thoughts, emotions, and impulses without identifying or acting on them. Therefore you're literally training multiple important skills at once.

Regular meditators have more grey matter in the prefrontal cortex and other areas of the brain responsible for self-awareness. And contrary to what you may think, it doesn't take years of practice to observe changes in the brain. One study showed that only three hours of meditation resulted in improved attention and self-control, and eleven hours led to visible changes in the brain.

The interesting thing is that willpower seems to be a finite resource. We seem to have a pool of "willpower energy" to draw upon each day. As that pool of energy is used up, our ability to resist and use self-control diminishes. For example, research has shown that resisting the same temptation, like chocolate or another sweet, early in the day is easier than resisting later in the day. Similarly, there have been numerous studies to show that if we are made to exert self-control on one task, then we are more likely to give in on a subsequent task.

We can imagine having a bucket filled with willpower. Every time we have to use self-control to resist some temptation, we dip into that bucket. The more we stress over that temptation or the longer we resist it, the more we delve into the pool. As we go throughout the day, because our bucket is draining, our ability to resist temptation decreases. Similar to how as we run low on fuel running, we develop fatigue, the same happens with self-control. Just like we might drink a recovery drink after our fatiguing long run, our willpower bucket needs to be refilled.





- Here are seven tips to build better willpower:
- Don't take on too much at once;
- Plan ahead;
- Avoid temptation;
- Strengthen your willpower;
- Try a food-tracking app for better eating;
- Reward yourself;
- Get support from others.

Additionally, and not surprisingly, physical fatigue impairs willpower. Some research has shown that if we restrict peoples sleep to 6 hours or less a night then they will have a decrease in self-control.

So what we are left with is a situation where decision making and using willpower both effect self-control, which in turns decreases initiative. So if we deplete our resources we not only won't resist temptations as well or for as long, but we will also show a lack of initiative to start tasks. It's a brutal cycle impacting both our drive and control.

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