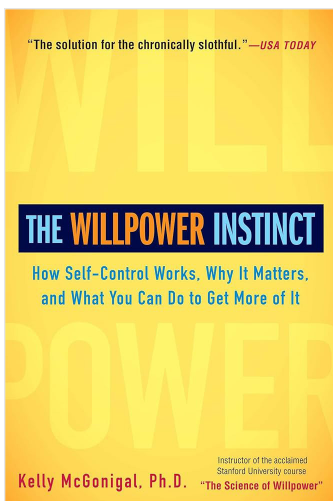


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D. is an award-winning psychology instructor at Stanford University as well as a health educator for the School of Medicine's Health Improvement Program. Her psychology courses for professionals and the general public are among the most popular in the history of Stanford's Continuing Studies program.

The Willpower Instinct

THE NUTSHELL

Now more than ever, people realize that they need willpower. The ability to control their attention, emotions, and desires influence their physical health, financial security, relationships, and professional success. Yet most people feel like willpower failures, sometimes in control and sometimes (often) not.

Americans feel that the #1 reason they don't meet their goals is a lack of willpower, and many feel guilty about failing themselves and others. They feel controlled by their impulses and cravings rather than their choices. I believe that the best way to improve your self-control is to understand how and why you lose control. Knowing why you are likely to give in enables you to avoid the traps that lead to willpower failures.

When most people think of willpower, they think of resisting temptation, whether it's chocolate, a cigarette, or a one-night stand. When they say they "have no willpower," they mean they are having a hard time saying no to themselves. Think of it as "I won't" power.

Willpower also includes being able to say "yes" when needed. Choosing to do it now, even when the TV is calling, requires willpower. Think of it as "I will" power. Both "I will" and "I won't" power are two sides of the coin, but there is more involved in willpower. To be able to say no or yes when you need to requires a third power: the ability to remember what you really want. To exert self-control, you need to find your deeper motivation when it really matters. This is "I want" power.

The Willpower Instinct

Willpower is all about harnessing all three powers in order to achieve your goals (and stay out of trouble). Combined with the uniquely human trait of self-awareness, developing these qualities is the key to growing in willpower, and understanding how willpower can fail.

That's the willpower challenge: part of you wants one thing and another part wants something else. And one part has to win.

The key to deciding which one wins is found in another faculty: our self-awareness. That is, the ability to realize what we are doing as we do it, and understand why we do it. Self-awareness enables us to know when willpower is required and empowers us to make conscious choices. So if we want to grow in willpower, we must grow in self-awareness.

Self-control functions basically like a muscle; when it is used, it gets tired. Every exercise of self-control, whether controlling your temper, resisting a dessert, or sticking to a budget, draws from the same place. Since every act of willpower depletes willpower, using self-control can actually lead to losing control. Refraining from gossiping at work can make it more difficult to resist dessert at lunch. That even includes trivial decisions, like choosing between brands of laundry detergent. All of it saps your willpower muscle.

Fortunately there are things you can do to both overcome willpower exhaustion and increase your self-control strength. Muscles can be trained, just like they can be drained. Any muscle in your body can be made stronger through exercise.

Just like overusing the muscle, framing willpower challenges as moral issues or measures of our worth sets us up to fail. For better self-control, focus on your commitment to your goals and values. Framing challenges as moral issues leads us to feeling guilt and shame when we fail. Rather than being helpful, the truth is that feeling bad leads to giving in, and dropping guilt makes you stronger. Choosing to forgive yourself for your failings actually empowers you to make better choices in the future.

How we think about the future also affects our exercise of self-control. Often we have a very unreal picture of ourselves in the future—we think we will be smarter, more disciplined, and more motivated—which often leads to procrastinating. We believe we'll do better in the future, not realizing that that future person is "us" and won't really be any different than we are today. When we project our current self into the future, we tend to make better choices today, because we are more aware that we will feel the consequences of our choices, for better or worse.

Most of us know what will happen if we tell someone "don't think about white bears." We automatically think of white bears. Trying to suppress our thoughts, feelings, and desires backfires and actually makes you more likely to think about the thing you most want to avoid. That undercuts your willpower. We need to give ourselves permission to feel what we feel, but not believe everything we think. Then we can choose to not act on those thoughts.

At its core, growing in willpower, or self-control, is really about learning to pay attention. It's training the mind to recognize when you are making a choice, and when you are acting out of habit or on autopilot. In a sense, growing in self-awareness is the key to unlocking your willpower.