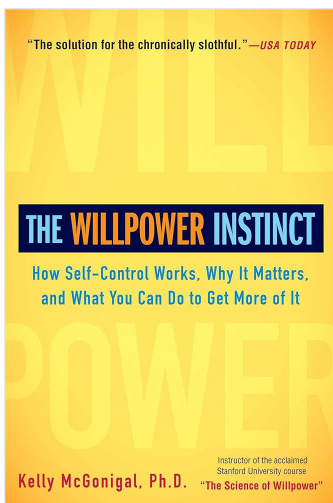


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The Willpower Instinct

THE SUMMARY

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.

Most books on changing behavior will help you set goals and even tell you how to reach them. But if that is all that was needed, our New Year's resolutions would all be successful. Few books help you understand *why* you are having such a hard time succeeding. 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.

Chapter 1: I Will, I Won't, I Want—What Willpower Is, and Why it Matters

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.

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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 same 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.

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.

The amount of willpower we have is one of the things that distinguishes one person from another. People with willpower—the ability to control their attention, emotions, and actions—end up better off from almost any angle. They are happier, healthier, have better relationships, make more money, and go further in their careers. They deal with stress and conflict better, and even live longer. If we want to improve our lives, willpower is the place to start.

When we watch our willpower fail—when we choose the short-term pleasure of dessert over the long-term pleasure of losing weight—it can seem like we have two different people living in our head. There’s the one that acts on impulse and seeks immediate gratification, and the one that makes wise choices to pursue our long-term goals. The truth is, they are both us, and we switch back and forth between them. 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.

Without self-awareness, our self-control system is useless. You need to be able to recognize when you’re making a choice that requires willpower; otherwise the brain will always default to what is easiest. A smoker who wants to quit must recognize the first signs of craving if he’s going to say “no.” Most of us actually live our lives on autopilot, and aren’t even aware we are making choices.

It is possible to train your brain to get better at self-control. One of the simplest ways to do so is to meditate. Scientists have discovered that when you ask the brain to meditate it gets better at a wide range of self-control skills, including attention, focus, stress management, impulse-control, and self-awareness. Over time, people who meditate become finely tuned willpower machines. And it doesn’t take much—just 3 hours of meditation practice led to improved attention and self-control, and after 11 hours, changes could be seen in the part of the brain that is connected to willpower.

Here is a simple, 5-minute/day meditation exercise you can start with:

1. Sit still and stay put—get comfortable, and then don’t fidget.
2. Pay attention to your breathing. When your mind wanders, just bring it back.
3. Notice how it feels to breathe, and notice how the mind wanders.

After a while, increase your time to 10-15 minutes/day; if that feels burdensome, go back to five. Simple.

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Ironically, some people get discouraged at meditating because they find their mind wanders so often and so easily. The truth is that being “bad” at meditation is exactly what makes the practice effective. Even when your meditation is distracted, people often are more focused after practicing than if they skip it. They are more aware of times they are being distracted and more able to redirect themselves to their goal. It’s not the success of the meditation that matters; it is the improved self-control that results.

Chapter 2: The Willpower Instinct—Your Body Was Born to Resist Cheesecake

All of us are familiar with having a craving. It may be for a cigarette, a drink, or cheesecake...whatever it is, we can actually feel it in our body. And when it hits, we have a choice—give in, or find the inner strength to say no. In those times, we need to protect ourselves *from* ourselves. That is what self-control is all about.

Your body has a built-in response to those internal threats, related to heart rate variability. Everybody’s heart rate varies somewhat—that is healthy and normal. When you are feeling stressed, often your heart rate will spike—and stay spiked. Your variability will decrease. That is what happens in the famous “fight or flight” response, but that is focused on external threats. When people successfully exert self-control, their heart rate goes down, but variability goes up.

Heart rate variability is such a good index of willpower that you can use it to predict who will resist temptation and who will give in. There are a lot of things that affect our heart rate’s variability—what we eat (a healthy diet matters), where you live (poor air quality decreases heart rate variability). Anything that puts stress on your mind or body can affect the physiology of self-control, and thus, your willpower. Anxiety, anger, and loneliness are all associated with lower variability and less self-control, as is chronic pain or illness. Anything you do to take care of your health—exercise, good sleep, quality time with friends, spiritual practices—will increase your variability and improve your willpower.

There are two specific things you can do right away to begin increasing your willpower reserve. The first is exercise. It turns out that exercise is the closest thing to a wonder drug that self-control experts have discovered. The benefits are immediate. 15 minutes on a treadmill daily will reduce cravings, relieve stress, and function as an anti-depressant. It increases heart rate variability and even makes your brain bigger and faster. And benefits begin with just five minutes per day!

The second thing is to get enough sleep. If you’re surviving on less than six hours of sleep per night, there’s a good chance that you don’t know what it’s like to have all your willpower. Getting a full night’s sleep will increase your energy and your self-control. Note: America is a sleep-deprived nation. On average we get two hours less sleep per night than in 1960. Our bad habits, like lack of sleep, drain our energy and increase our stress—and steal our self-control. (Stress encourages you to focus on the short term, but self-control requires keeping the big picture in mind. Learning to manage your stress is one of the most important things you can do to increase your willpower).

Chapter 3: Too Tired to Resist—Why Self-Control is Like a Muscle

One of the most troubling findings from the science of self-control: People who use their willpower seem to run out of it. It’s as if there is only so much to go around. The implications of this are important—modern life is full of demands

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that can drain your willpower. Researchers have found that self-control is actually highest in the morning and steadily declines over the course of the day. It simply wears out.

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.

Researchers have put this idea to the test with willpower-training regimens. We aren't talking about Marine boot camp here, but something much simpler: challenge the self-control muscle by asking people to control one small thing that they aren't used to controlling. Studies have found that committing to any small, consistent act of self-control—improving posture, squeezing a hand grip daily, cutting back on sweets—can increase overall willpower. In a study, one group was asked to simply say “yes” instead of “yeah.” After two weeks there was an increase in self-control!

The important muscle being trained in all these things isn't specifically willpower. It's the habit of noticing what we are about to do, and choosing to do the more difficult thing instead of the easiest. Through each of these exercises the brain gets used to pausing before acting. That's the essence of self-control.

In thinking about our tendency to run out of willpower, the question emerges as to whether we run out of power, or do we run out of will?

We can learn something by looking at our actual muscles, and why they get tired and give up.

Timothy Noakes, a professor of exercise and sports science, studied marathon runners and came to a surprising conclusion. When he looked at how they experienced physical exhaustion under extreme conditions, he found that there was no evidence of the muscles failing; rather, it appeared that the brain was telling the muscles to stop. As the brain sensed a depleting energy supply, it created a feeling of fatigue in order to “put the brakes on,” but that feeling had nothing to do with the actual capacity of the muscles. Noakes conclusion was “Fatigue should no longer be considered a physical event but rather a sensation or emotion.” Endurance athletes learn to recognize that the first wave of fatigue is not a real limit, and with sufficient motivation can overcome it.

Self-control operates the same way as the physical body—we often feel depleted before we actually are. Just because we feel like we are out of willpower doesn't mean that we are; we just need to find the motivation to use it.

Often it is our beliefs about what we are capable of that determine whether we give up or press on. Some people don't believe the feeling of mental fatigue that follows a challenging act of self-control. The idea that self-control may be limited seems to reflect people's beliefs about willpower, not their true physical or mental limits. That doesn't mean we have an unlimited capacity but rather that we often have more willpower than we think we do.

The limits of self-control present a paradox: we can't control everything, but the only way to increase our self-control is to stretch our limits. “Use it or lose it” applies to willpower as much as it does to physical strength. Our challenge is to train like an intelligent athlete, pushing our limits while pacing ourselves.

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Chapter 4: License to Sin—Why Being Good Gives us Permission to Be Bad

It is no surprise any more when an upright citizen—a religious or political leader, for example, has a moral or willpower failure. To avoid following in their footsteps, we need to rethink our idea that every willpower failure is caused by weakness. There are a number of ways that we give ourselves permission to fail, and by understanding those we can also discover how to keep ourselves on track.

In a Princeton University study, researchers found that after people rejected the idea that “most women are not really smart,” they were more likely to choose a man for a high-level job than a woman. That was a surprise—they expected the opposite. The researchers had come upon something called *moral licensing*. Most of us aren’t trying to be perfect; we just want to feel “good enough”—which then gives us permission to do whatever we want.

Put another way, when you do something good, you feel good about yourself. That means you’re more likely to trust your impulses, which often means giving yourself permission to do something bad. (It also can let us off the hook when we’re asked to do something good). Example: people who recall a recent act of generosity gave 60% less money to a charitable request than those who didn’t recall such an act.

Anything you moralize—put in terms of right/wrong or good/evil—becomes fair game for moral licensing. If you tell yourself you’re “good” when you exercise and “bad” when you don’t, then you are more likely to skip the gym tomorrow if you work out today. In short, whenever we have conflicting desires, being good gives us permission to be a little bad.

This isn’t really logical—it’s all about how we feel. We trust the feeling that we have been good, and are therefore a good person. Because we are good, we often deserve “a treat,” which is usually some kind of self-sabotaging behavior, like breaking your diet, blowing your budget, etc.

Moralizing a behavior makes us more likely to resist it. That’s just human nature—we resist rules imposed by others for our own good. To avoid the moral licensing trap, you have to separate real moral issues from things that are merely difficult. Cheating on your spouse is a moral issue; cheating on your diet is not. Yet most people think of all forms of self-control as a moral test.

Another way we fall into the moral licensing trap is by focusing on the one thing that all Americans moralize: Progress! Progress is good, and when we make it we like to congratulate ourselves. However, making progress can lead us into the same trap—we feel good about making progress, which gives us permission to indulge, skip a workout, etc. Focusing on progress can actually hold us back from success, not because progress is bad (obviously), but because of how it makes us feel.

A better question than “Have I made progress?” is “How committed am I to my goal?” That simple shift in focus leads us to interpret our actions differently. We say “I did that because I wanted to” and not “I did that, great, now I get to do what I really want.” One gives permission to indulge, the other reinforces our choices. It helps us focus on *why* we are doing something, which strengthens our willpower.

Ironically, it isn’t just making good choices that can give us permission to cheat. People who merely intend to exercise later are more likely to overeat at dinner. This habit allows us to sin today, and make up for it later (or so we tell ourselves). Sometimes the mind gets excited about the *opportunity* to act on a goal, and mistakes the opportunity

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for the accomplishment. And with the goal to make a healthy choice out of the way, the unmet goal—immediate pleasure—takes priority.

That optimism about the future affects us in another way. We always seem to think things will be better then—we'll have more time, more willpower, etc. We look into the future and fail to see the challenges of today. Therefore, we can feel justified in putting something off, confident that our future behavior will more than make up for it. We think our future selves will be better and our future circumstances easier—neither of which is accurate.

A final licensing trap we need to be aware of is our own deep desire to believe that what we want isn't so bad. When we want permission to indulge, we'll take any hint of a virtue as a justification to give in. In 1992, the SnackWells cookie craze hit. When dieters saw the words "Fat Free" on the box, it gave permission to eat large amounts of the sugar-filled treats. We justified our choices with the words on the box. Now we are more likely to fall for the word "organic" than "fat free," but the effect is the same. (Oreo cookies labeled organic are perceived as more appropriate to eat every day).

Moral licensing, at its core, is an identity crisis. We only reward ourselves for being good if we think our true self really wants to be bad. In that case, every act of self-control is a punishment. But what if we see ourselves differently? We could believe that who we truly are is the self that wants the best for us—the one that wants to live in line with our core values. Then we won't act like someone who has to be tricked or forced to pursue our goals, and then rewarded for making any effort at all.

Chapter 5: The Brain's Big Lie—Why We Mistake Wanting for Happiness

One of the things that motivates us to act is the promise of reward. When the brain recognizes an opportunity for reward, it releases a chemical called dopamine, which tells the rest of the brain what to pay attention to and what to pursue. A dopamine rush doesn't create happiness; it makes us feel alert and awake. We recognize the *possibility* of feeling good and are willing to work for it.

The joy of winning registers in a different part of the brain. Dopamine is for action, not happiness. Dopamine prompts action so we won't miss out by failing to act. Its focus is anticipation, not pleasure. Anything we think will make us feel good will trigger this reward system—the smell of coffee, a "sale" sign, etc. The flood of dopamine causes you to fixate on obtaining whatever the hoped-for reward is, as if it is critical to your survival.

Why does this matter? When dopamine puts our brains on a reward-seeking mission, we become the most risk-taking, impulsive, and out-of-control version of ourselves. Even if the reward never comes, just the promise of reward is enough to keep us hooked.

Those who want your money have figured this out. The design of stores, recipes, lotto commercials—all are designed to trigger a dopamine rush in order to influence your behavior. Researchers at Stanford University have found that free food and drink samples make shoppers hungrier and thirstier, and put them in a reward-seeking frame of mind (which will cause more spending). Even if you resist the free sample, your brain—filled with dopamine, will be looking for something to satisfy the promise of reward. Businesses even use smells to manufacture desire where none existed (which is why realtors often put out fresh-baked cookies at an Open House).

Although we live in a world designed to make us want, we can learn to see through it, just by paying attention. That won't eliminate all your wants, but it will give you a chance to exercise your "I won't" power.

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The most challenging thing about this is that we humans have almost no ability to distinguish the promise of reward from the pleasure we are actually seeking. That means we will often continue to pursue things that don't make us happy, and even bring us misery instead of happiness. That's how powerful dopamine is. However, there is growing evidence that if you pay close attention to the lack of *real* rewards, the magical spell wears off. If you force your brain to compare what it expects from a reward to what it actually gets, eventually your brain will adjust its expectations.

Chapter 6: What the Hell—How Feeling Bad Leads to Giving In

When you are down, what do you do? Most of us do something that brings pleasure—eating, drinking, watching TV, etc. However, a national study on stress showed that the most commonly used strategies were rated as *ineffective* by those who used them. As we explore the effects of stress, anxiety, and guilt on willpower, we'll find that feeling bad leads to giving in. Cigarette warnings can make smokers crave a cigarette, bad economic news can make people shop, etc.

The brain is especially vulnerable to temptation when feeling bad. Your brain wants to protect your mood, so when you are under stress, your brain is going to point you toward whatever it thinks will make you feel better. Stress shifts the brain into a reward-seeking state.

The promise of reward combined with the promise of relief leads to all sorts of illogical behavior. Binge eaters who are ashamed of their weight turn to food to fix their feelings. Procrastinators who are stressed because of how far behind they are on a project put it off even longer to avoid thinking about it. The goal of feeling better trumps the goal of self-control.

There *are* some stress-relief strategies that really work. The most effective ones are exercising or playing sports, praying or attending a religious service, reading, listening to music, getting a massage, or spending time on a hobby. Each of these release serotonin, a mood-enhancing chemical, rather than dopamine. They also reduce stress hormones in the body.

Looking at the effects of being down on our self-control leads us to one of the biggest threats to willpower: the “what-the-hell effect.” This describes the common cycle of indulgence, regret, and greater indulgence. Diet researchers noticed that many dieters felt so bad about any lapse that they considered their whole diet blown. Instead of just starting up again, they would say, “What the hell, I already blew it. I might as well eat the whole thing.” Giving in makes you feel bad, which motivates you to want to feel better—and the easiest, quickest way to do that is often the very thing you feel bad about.

Note: it's not the first “fall” that is the problem; it's the feelings of shame and guilt that follow it. Once you're stuck in the cycle, it can seem like there is no way out except to keep going. So how do you break that cycle?

Surprisingly, the answer is: self-forgiveness. Most people are surprised by that; they assume that only gives people permission for greater indulgence. The truth is that we may think that guilt motivates us to correct our mistakes, but it's just one more way that feeling bad leads to giving in. If you think that the key to greater willpower is being harder on yourself, you are not alone. But you are wrong. Guilt and shame are associated with less motivation and worse self-control, and are one of the biggest predictors of depression.

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Self-forgiveness also increases accountability. Studies have shown that people who are more compassionate towards themselves are more likely to take responsibility for their failures, are more willing to receive feedback from others, and are more likely to learn from the experience. Forgiveness takes away the pain and shame of the failure, and neutralizes the what-the-hell effect, which is simply an attempt to escape those bad feelings.

Sometimes feeling bad causes us to resolve to change rather than wallowing in our guilt. But resolving to change and actually changing are two different things. Vowing to change feels good, fills us with hope, and gives us a sense of being in control. Resolving to change is the best part of the change process. Unfortunately, it's all downhill after that: having to exercise self-control, say no when we want to say yes, etc. Choosing to change is much more fun than the messy business of following through.

To avoid stress-induced willpower failures, we need to discover what really makes us feel better. We need to give ourselves permission to fail and forgive those failures, not using them as an excuse to give in or give up. When it comes to increasing self-control, self-compassion works better than beating ourselves up.

Chapter 7: Putting the Future on Sale—The Economics of Instant Gratification

Many of our problems with temptation and procrastination come back to one uniquely human problem: how we think about the future. No other species is able to think in any meaningful way about the future. However, the problem is that while we can conceive of a future, we cannot see it clearly.

One issue that undercuts us is referred to as “delay discounting.” The longer you have to wait for a reward, the less it is worth to you. Even small delays can dramatically lower the perceived value of a reward. We regularly choose immediate gratification at the cost of future happiness, because we discount the value of that future benefit.

This reality can actually be used to our benefit. For maximum effect, the immediate reward must be available now, and visible. As soon as there is any distance between you and the temptation, the balance of power shifts back to the brain's system of self-control. That's good news for those who want to delay gratification. Anything you can do to create that distance will make it easier to say no. Example: one study found that just putting a candy bar in a desk drawer instead of on top of the desk reduced worker's candy consumption by over 30%.

While it's human nature to discount future rewards, everyone has a different discount rate. Some people are much more able to say no to instant rewards in order to get a big reward later. How big your discount rate is turns out to be a major determinant of your long-term health and success. Those with a low discount rate—who choose immediate gratification—are more likely to smoke or drink to excess, have a greater risk of addiction, are less likely to save for retirement, engage in risky behavior, and even procrastinate more. To escape this mindset, we need to find a way to make the future matter.

One way to do so is by embracing the power of *precommitment*. This is the idea that you decide ahead of time what you are going to do in a certain situation—you eliminate options. This approach looks at your tempted self as unpredictable and unreliable. If you know that a certain temptation hits you at a certain place—stop going there.

Another way is to think honestly about “future you.” Future you is you—in the future. We always think future you will have more time, energy, and willpower than present you (who you are today). Future you is free from anxiety, is better organized, and more motivated than present you. This is one of the most puzzling yet predictable mental errors humans make—idealizing our future selves.

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That would be fine if we could really count on our future selves to be so good. But usually when we arrive in the future, that idealized self is nowhere to be found, and our same old self is all we have. Our brains seem to think of our future self as a completely different person—and one that often has little resemblance to who we are today. Practically, we are disconnected from that person.

When we are disconnected from our future self, several things can happen. First, we don't really consider the future consequences of the choices we make today. Yes, I may have health problems in the future if I don't exercise and eat right today, but that reality carries no emotional power if I'm not really connected to my future self. Second, since we idealize who we will be—more time, energy, willpower, etc.—it's easy to push off hard choices until then. Of course, when we arrive in the future we usually don't find that person.

Studies have shown that people with high “future-self continuity”—the degree to which you see your future self being the same as your current self—make different and better choices. They will save more money and take on less debt, for example. Strengthening your future-self continuity will do more than help you financially—it will help you with any willpower challenge. High continuity seems to push people to become the best version of themselves *now*. Being disconnected from our future-selves gives us permission to ignore the consequences of our choices, while being connected seems to protect us from our worst impulses.

So how do you strengthen that continuity? One way is to use your imagination and visualize yourself as you are now in the future. The more vivid and real the future feels, the less likely you are to make a decision you will regret when you get there. Whether you imagine yourself fit or fat, either one will probably get you off the couch today!

How we think about the future significantly impacts our willpower. Far-off rewards carry less weight, so we choose immediate gratification. We don't see how we will be tempted down the line, so we more easily abandon our goals. And we need to remember that the future self who receives the consequences of today's choices is still us, and will appreciate the good choices we make.

Chapter 8: Infected! Why Willpower is Contagious

Human beings are social creatures, and we are affected by what is going on around us more than we realize. We like to think our choices aren't affected by others, but research shows that our choices are powerfully shaped by what other people think, want, and do, and what we think they want us to do.

In 1990, no state in the nation had an obesity rate higher than 15%. Ten years later, eighteen states had obesity rates from 20-24%, and by 2009, only one state had an obesity rate of *less* than 20%. Health officials began to talk about an obesity epidemic. As they began to study what was happening, they discovered that obesity was contagious. If you have a friend who becomes obese, your risk of becoming obese increases by 171%.

We naturally mimic what we see in the people around us. If you watch body language, you'll notice people in conversation start to adopt each other's positions—if one crosses his arms, soon the others will also. That instinct means that when you see someone else reach for a snack or a drink, you may unconsciously do it also—and lose your willpower.

We also seem to be natural mind readers. We are always analyzing why someone is doing something. Why is that woman screaming at that man? This helps us predict other's behaviors and avoid social problems. However, there is

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a self-control side effect—our mind reading activates the same goals in us. Psychologists call this *goal contagion*. It is surprisingly easy to catch another person’s goals in a way that affects our choices.

What does that all mean for our willpower? The good news is that you can’t just catch a random goal—the contagion is limited to a goal you already have, at some level. But a very minor goal could get activated and brought to the forefront. Also, goal contagion works in both directions: you can catch self-control as well as self-indulgence (but self-indulgence seems easier to catch).

Note: sometimes we don’t catch specific goals, like to save money, but the more general goal to follow our impulses. For example, studies have shown that rule-breaking is contagious—not only the specific rule we see being broken, but any rule. People who see a bicycle chained to a fence with a “No Bicycles” sign are more likely to take an illegal shortcut through the fence. In other words, when we see someone else behaving badly, our self-control deteriorates and we are more likely to give in to *any* of our own impulses.

In California, a survey was done with questions about energy conservation, including questions about what motivated people to conserve. Was it saving money, protecting the environment, helping future generations? The only belief that actually affected their behavior was this: “Everyone else is doing it.” This is called *social proof*—when the rest of our tribe does something, we think it’s a smart thing to do. This social proof has a huge impact on our behavior. That’s why undecided voters can be swayed by poll numbers, and why we are more likely to go to a box office hit than a bomb. Even though we say we value independence, the truth is we cannot suppress our desire to fit in.

This can be used to our advantage. If we want to discourage a certain behavior, just convince people it’s the habit of a group they wouldn’t want to be part of. Or we can highlight positive trends in behavior, although that doesn’t happen very often. It’s more common to hear the horror stories: 40% of Americans *never* exercise, and only 14% eat the recommended amounts of fruits and veggies. Unfortunately, if we are part of one of those groups, those numbers just prove we are normal, and show us it’s ok to not do those things.

When thinking about a choice, we often think about ourselves as the object of other’s evaluations. This can be a powerful boost to self-control—imagining the pride we’ll feel when we accomplish a goal, or the shame we’ll feel from other’s disapproval, can have a huge effect on us. (With shame, don’t forget the “what-the-hell” effect. There’s a fine line between the self-control benefits of *anticipating* disapproval and the willpower-draining effects of actually feeling ashamed). Pride works much better, especially if we think others are watching, or if we’ll have the chance to share our success.

Chapter 9: Don’t Read This Chapter—The Limits of “I Won’t” Power

Stop thinking about white bears! Numerous studies have shown how impossible it is to follow that instruction. As soon as we are told that, we can’t seem to stop. While that may not seem like a big willpower failure, the problem with prohibition extends to any thought we try to ban. “I Won’t” power fails terribly when it’s applied to the inner world of thoughts and feelings.

Why does trying to eliminate a thought or feeling trigger a rebound? Trying not to think about something guarantees that it is never far from your mind. That leads to a second problem: when that thought keeps coming back, your brain begins to assume it must be true. Whatever fear, desire, or thought you try to push away will actually become more convincing and compelling.

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So how do you get out of this? Ironically, the answer is: Give up. When you stop trying to control unwanted thoughts, they stop controlling you. Studies show that when you give people permission to express a thought they were trying to suppress, they become less likely to think about it. The willingness to think what you think and feel what you feel—without assuming it is true, and without being compelled to act on it—is an effective strategy for dealing with all sorts of problems, like anxiety, depression, and addictions.

One scientist teaches social anxiety sufferers to observe and accept their thoughts and feelings—all of them. The goal isn't to get rid of them, but to learn that they can handle them. If they can handle the *inner* experience, they can handle the outer world as well. He teaches them to notice the thought and the physical reactions connected to it, and that if they don't fight the anxiety, it will naturally run its course. That is true for all kinds of urges—they tend to build in intensity, but will eventually run their course. Understanding that often gives people the ability to “surf the wave” until it crashes and dissolves.

The same principle holds with dieters. A 2010 study found that dieters are much more likely to try to suppress thoughts about food...and those who do have the least control over food. They have more intense food cravings and are more likely to binge than those who don't try to control their thoughts.

Many researchers have come to the conclusion that this is what makes dieting ineffective—outlawing certain foods. It's actually more effective to focus positively—to ask people to think about what they *can do* to improve their health. Essentially changing from “I won't” power to “I will” power. Instead of suppressing our appetites, we pursue health. Studies show that to be much more effective—ending prohibitions gives us more, not less, control over what we eat.

Trying to control our thoughts and feelings has the opposite effect of what most people expect. If we really want more self-control, we need to accept that it is impossible to control what comes into our mind. All we can do is choose what we believe and act on.

Chapter 10: Final Thoughts

Over and over we've seen that we have multiple “selves” in our head—one that wants instant gratification, and one with a higher purpose. Self-control is about understanding that, not trying to change it. In our attempts at self-control, our usual weapons of guilt and shame don't work. People with the greatest self-control aren't waging war with themselves! If there is a secret for more self-control, it boils down to this: learning to pay attention. It's training the mind to recognize when you're making a choice, rather than running on autopilot. Becoming more self-aware is the key to making it all work, and increasing our willpower and self-control.