

WILLPOWER: *YOUR SECRET WEAPON*

BY ELEANOR BROWN

The authors of a bestselling book suggest willpower is a finite but renewable resource.





We use willpower to stay focused throughout the workday, and it's not surprising we sometimes give in to the lure of cookies on tough days.

So let's say you've decided to give up sugar. On the first day, you skip your regular morning latte, evade the siren song of the doughnuts in your morning meeting, dodge the cookies in the lunchroom and turn down the candy at the checkout aisle of the grocery store.

And then, late that night, you head into the kitchen to do the dinner dishes only to find yourself facedown in a bowl of Ben & Jerry's, wondering why you don't even have the willpower to make it through one day of your resolution.

What went wrong?

We start our days, our weeks, our years with the best of intentions. We have great reasons for wanting to make changes in

our lives, but we just can't seem to stick to our goals.

And then we beat ourselves up, blame ourselves, tell ourselves we are weak, that we have no willpower.

But the authors of a recent bestseller are here to tell us differently. In “Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength,” research psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and New York Times science writer John Tierney explain there are multiple reasons you give in to that brownie, or the lure of the sofa instead of the gym, or a cigarette, or that desperate urge to check Pinterest instead of cleaning the oven.

And none of them means you're a failure.

A RENEWABLE RESOURCE

Baumeister and Tierney's review of research on self-control shows us there are two things about willpower you must know immediately: "Your supply of willpower is limited, and you use the same resource for many different things."

We often berate ourselves for having “no willpower” when we promise we are going to sit down to read “Anna Karenina” and end up playing Candy Crush instead. But that is not true. We have willpower. We just demand a great deal from it.

Looking back on the example day above, in which we started out resisting lattes and ended up in a rendezvous with Ben and Jerry by the romantic light of the refrigerator door, we used will-power for far more things than we give ourselves credit for.

Yes, we used it to resist sweets, but we also used willpower when we made decisions at work, when we kept ourselves from arguing with a difficult co-worker, when we were shopping for dinner at the grocery store.

We tend to think of willpower as some sort of discrete power we call on only for lifestyle resolutions, but Baumeister and Tierney define its core as our ability to make decisions. And we make decisions all day, including the times we encounter desire, which is alarmingly frequently.

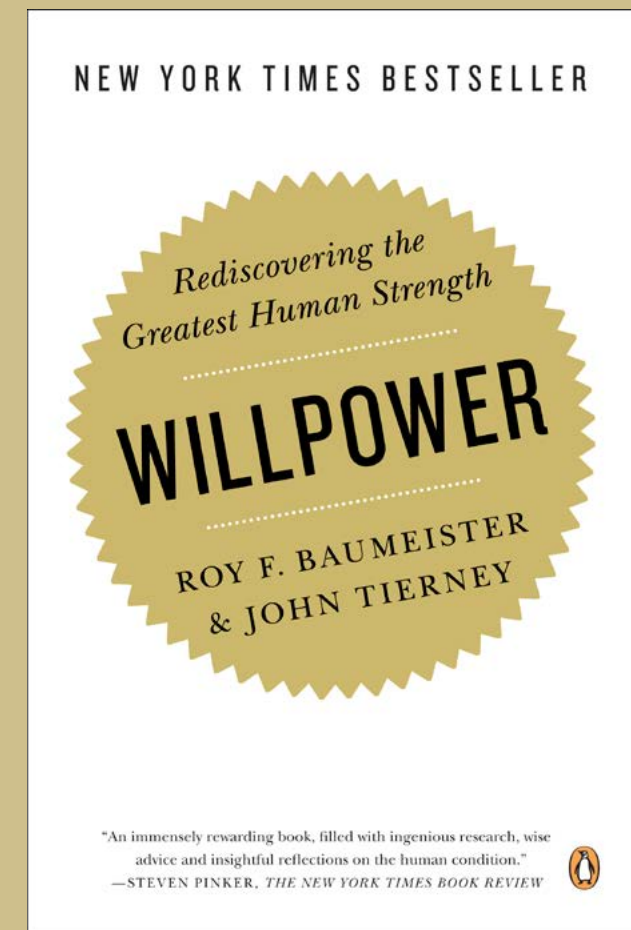
“Willpower” cites a German study that gave 200 people beepers that went off randomly seven times per day. When the beeper went off, the subjects were asked to record if they were experiencing or had recently felt some kind of desire—anything from a craving for sweets or a fleeting wish to take a nap to a pressing urge to tell a boss, honestly and in great detail, their true feelings about their job.

About half the participants reported experiencing some kind of desire each time the beepers went off, and another quarter said they had felt desire in the past few minutes.

“Desire,” the study showed, “turned out to be the norm, not the exception.”

Adding up those responses, the study estimated “that people spend at least a fifth of their waking hours resisting desires—between three and four hours per day.”

Basically, using our willpower is a part-time job.



Roy F. Baumeister (left) and John Tierney



Which would you choose on a tough workday?

had to avoid sugar directly four times (five, if you count the moment we succumbed to the call of the ice cream). If we had only been using our willpower for that, we might have been fine. But of course our day was much busier, so we used willpower constantly—forcing ourselves out of bed, making choices involving a project at work, not snarking at our spouse.

So by the time the Great Ice-cream Showdown came, our willpower was greatly reduced: Not only do we have a limited amount to begin with, but we had spent it on more than just avoiding sugar.

This is also why lengthy lists of New Year's resolutions often fail. We're using the same limited, exhaustible store of self-control for every one of those shiny new habits we're trying to build.

The longer the list of resolutions, the more likely we are to be standing in its smoking remains on Feb. 1, having achieved nary a one of our optimistic aims. We would be much better off going after one goal at a time rather than making a list of a dozen ways we really are going to change this year.

"No one," the authors say, "has enough willpower for that list."

The good news is that self-control is a renewable resource, and "Willpower" explains we shore it up in the ways we shore up everything else about our bodies: with good food and good sleep.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT SELF-CONTROL IS A RENEWABLE RESOURCE.

In fact, food is an incredibly important part of willpower. Baumeister and Tierney cite a study of Israeli judges reviewing parole requests, noting the odds of a prisoner's receiving parole before vs. after a mid-morning break and a snack.

The results? Prisoners who appeared just before the judges took a break and ate something had a 20 percent chance of being paroled, but those who appeared after the judges took that break were 65 percent likely to be paroled.

This seems arbitrary at best and horribly unfair at worst, but it shows us something startling about willpower.



The longer you stare at this picture, the more you'll want that glass of beer.

THE SURPRISING SOURCE OF SELF-CONTROL

Prisoners and dieters, listen up: Your brain (and your parole judge’s brain) works off glucose. You need glucose for thinking, for decision-making and for self-control. The authors put it simply this way: “No glucose, no willpower.”

And the judges needed willpower to make decisions about parole. As they moved through their day, making decision after decision, their supply of glucose eroded steadily. And because they still had work to do, Baumeister and Tierney argue, the judges’ brains were looking for ways to save what little energy they had left. So they defaulted to “the easiest and safest option, which often is to stick with the status quo: Leave the prisoner in prison.”

But give the judges a little snack (or lunch—the effect of that meal on the fortunes of prisoners was similar to the effect of a mid-morning break), and they rebounded.

The authors of “Willpower” cite study after study showing the link between glucose and self-control. People with hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) are “more likely to be convicted of a wide variety of offenses: traffic violations, public profanity, shoplifting, destruction of property, exhibitionism, public masturbation, embezzlement, arson, spouse abuse and child abuse.”

Children who ate breakfast “learned more and misbehaved less” than children who had nothing to eat, one study showed. But after a snack? The “differences disappeared as if by magic.”

Another experiment put student participants who had been fasting in a room with chocolate, radishes and freshly baked cookies. Some students were permitted only to eat radishes, some were allowed to eat the cookies and the chocolate.

After spending time in that room, the participants were given puzzles to work on. Unsurprisingly, the cookie-powered students, whose self-control had not just been strenuously tested, tried to solve the puzzles for two-and-a-half times as long as the poor, restricted radish-eaters, who’d used up their willpower-driven focus resisting the cookies and the candy—20 minutes vs. eight minutes.

This could seem like rotten news for dieters, who are relying on willpower to keep them from sweet temptations, but it actually offers some great information.

First, if you’ve ever started a diet with high hopes, only to find yourself succumbing inexplicably to a tasteless but sugary fistful of marshmallow Peeps, know that you are not a failure. It wasn’t necessarily a crisis of willpower; it might have been a crisis of glucose. Perhaps you’d used an unusual amount of self-control and glucose watching what you were eating, and when your brain ran out of fuel, it started searching desperately for a quick hit of sugar to keep going.

Second, you can work to avoid that crisis in the future. The authors of “Willpower” suggest that thinking about powering your self-control as well as fueling your body will change the way you think about the food you eat. Baumeister and Tierney warn against eating foods with a high glycemic index that can cause “boom-and-bust cycles, leaving you short on glucose and self-control—and too often unable to resist the body’s craving for quick hits of starch and sugar from doughnuts and candy.” Instead, they recommend planning and arranging to have on hand healthier, lower-glycemic food options so your choices can be thoughtful instead of powered by low-blood-sugar desperation.

And planning, Baumeister and Tierney explain, is another fundamental of willpower.

RECLAIM YOUR PRODUCTIVITY

- RescueTime**—Track the amount of time you spend on applications and websites so you know where your workday is really going.
- Freedom/Anti-Social**—Turn the Internet connection on your computer off entirely for a specific amount of time (Freedom), or simply block a list of sites you know kill your productivity (Anti-Social).
- Back to Work**—A podcast on productivity and business, with Merlin Mann and Dan Benjamin.

WILLPOWER-BOOSTING APPS

- Commit** (iPhone)—Set a goal and then track how many days in a row you practice that habit. Daily reminders motivate you not to break the “chain” of positive activity.
- Lose It!** (multi-platform app and website)—Track your food and exercise, set goals, and reap rewards for achievements (such as pounds lost) and good behavior (such as daily tracking).
- EpicWin** (iPhone)—Turn your to-do list into a game: Chores become “quests,” and you earn points for each task, from cleaning the kitty litter to making the doctor’s appointment you’ve been putting off.



Precommitting to workouts by signing in for a week's worth of CrossFit classes can help you avoid ditching training during a stressful day.

FLEXING THE WILLPOWER MUSCLE

When we set a goal, it seems easy. Of course we can quit smoking, give up sugar, save for retirement. We're excited and ready to begin.

But that confidence is evidence of "what the economist George Loewenstein calls the 'hot-cold empathy gap': the inability, during a cool, rational, peaceful moment, to appreciate how we'll behave during the heat of passion and temptation," "Willpower's" authors explain.

So if it's your day off, it seems reasonable that you'll have time for an hour of meditation during a workday, and when you're not actually sitting next to a hateful relative, it seems like a no-brainer to promise to be more patient with him or her.

But as we saw during our sample day, promises you make when all is well can be terribly hard to keep when you're stressed out and exhausted, especially if you're relying on willpower to get you through. We've seen how many demands we make on it and how quickly the resource gets exhausted.

Instead, you're better off figuring out ways to make what Baumeister and Tierney call a "precommitment."

They explain: "The essence of this strategy is to lock yourself into a virtuous path ... make it impossible—or somehow unthinkable—disgraceful or sinful—to leave the path."

IF YOU PLAN HOW TO DEAL WITH TEMPTATION AHEAD OF TIME YOU NEVER HAVE TO STRUGGLE WITH TEMPTATION AND TAX YOUR SELF-CONTROL.

Precommitment frees up your willpower. If you plan how to deal with temptation ahead of time—packing healthy lunches and snacks the night before work, or having money automatically diverted from your paycheck into a retirement account—you never have to struggle with temptation and tax your self-control.

Planning does not make willpower unnecessary. But it does allow us to do something vital: preserve that self-control for extraordinary circumstances.

Analysis of studies reviewing behaviors of people with high levels of self-control demonstrated that one of the major differences was their reliance on habit.

If I use small bits of willpower to set a regular habit of studying for a certain amount of time every day, it doesn't take a heroic effort to get me to sit down at my desk when a paper is due. And then I've got lots of willpower available for the occasional unexpected encounter with a quesadilla.

Lots of tools are available to help us with precommitment, depending on how you work best. Baumeister and Tierney recommend a website called StickK.com, which uses the principle of rewards and penalties to support our goals and allows us to choose a friend to referee our progress. Whether you're motivated by reward or penalty is up to you—a reward might be a massage at a specific progress point, and a penalty might be donating that massage money to a politician or organization you loathe if you fail to meet that goal.

WEBSITES TO MOTIVATE YOU

Quantified Self—Part of a movement dedicated to "self-knowledge through numbers," Quantified Self curates articles and videos about people successfully improving their health and lives through data tools. Community forums also available.

Mint—Let Mint chart and analyze your financial habits. Track your spending by category so you can see where your money goes, or go a step further and set goals: saving for a large purchase or following a budget.

StickK—Increase the odds of achieving your goal by putting money on the line, enlisting a referee to keep you honest and inviting friends for support



When you're engaged in your work and derive great satisfaction from it, the lure of Facebook and Twitter is less powerful.

But if you don't like the idea of carrots and sticks, there's another school of thought. Daniel Pink, author of "Drive" (Riverhead Books, 2009), argues outsourcing our motivation to external factors might actually work against us. Pink believes that while extrinsic sources of motivation (paying children for good grades, offering prizes as incentives at work) might encourage us to work harder for short amounts of time, they remove any intrinsic drive we have to excel as a matter of personal achievement, short-circuit our creativity and "can reduce a person's longer-term motivation to continue the project."

Instead, Pink argues, we need to figure out ways to help people motivate themselves to excel. Pure, internal motivation, he believes, drives us to achieve the most. Our willpower is taxed less because we truly want to realize our goals, so the decisions don't drain us as much.

So maybe as adults we can figure out how to master our self-control for a higher purpose, but if Pink is right and carrots and sticks aren't the best way to strengthen our willpower, how can we teach our kids to learn to control themselves?

RAISING CHILDREN WITH SELF-CONTROL

Amy Chua's "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" (Penguin Books, 2011) ignited a firestorm of controversy when it was published. Chua, a Chinese-American Yale professor and mother of two daughters, wrote about her "Chinese parenting" style. Her rules for her daughters included no sleepovers, no play dates and up to three hours of music practice per day starting at the age of 5. The book also included an oft-quoted episode in which Chua rejected a handmade birthday card from her daughter, stating it was not her best work and demanding the child redo it.

While some of Chua's parenting strategies seemed shocking or cruel to Western parents, her children indeed turned out to be quite successful. Chua describes her method this way: "Chinese parents have two things over their Western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children, and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much (direction and criticism) they can take."

But Baumeister and Tierney take a different view: "Forget about self-esteem. Work on self-control."

There's a great deal of cultural discussion about children's self-esteem, but research discussed in "Willpower" demonstrates self-esteem is a byproduct of success, not the other way around. And that success comes, at least partially, from good habits of self-control.



Dave Re/ CrossFit Journal

According to the authors of “Willpower,” continually focusing on certain tasks can help train the “self-control muscle.”

The fact that Chua’s parenting cornerstones—“set clear goals, enforce rules, punish failure, reward excellence”—paid off is not surprising. Children, like adults, have the ability to strengthen their willpower through regular use and development of habit.

“Anything that forces children to exercise their self-control muscle,” “Willpower’s” authors argue, “can be helpful: taking music lessons, memorizing poems, saying prayers, minding their table manners, avoiding the use of profanity, writing thank-you notes.”

That doesn’t mean there is no room for childhood in children’s lives. Some valuable tools for mastering willpower can be found in play, from creating and sustaining an imaginary game of pretend to the discipline of sports to video games.

Wait. Video games? It’s true. Baumeister and Tierney think we have much to learn from game designers.

“They’ve refined the basic steps of self-control: setting clear and attainable goals, giving instantaneous feedback, and offering enough encouragement for people to keep practicing and improving.”

But however they learn it, children whose practice of self-control has given them a strong willpower muscle are ahead of the rest of us. They’ve developed good habits and therefore don’t have to rely on willpower as often. When they do need it, they haven’t depleted the store by using it on small decisions they could have made automatically through force of habit.

Just like adults, children have that single, depletable store of willpower they must learn to manage. And if we give them the same understanding of its pitfalls and powers, they can reap its benefits throughout their lives.

But just because we didn’t know the secrets of willpower all along doesn’t mean we can’t learn to use it better now.

GIVE YOURSELF A CHANCE TO SUCCEED

The authors of “Willpower” have four basic recommendations on learning to manage your self-control:

1. Use your willpower wisely—“to develop effective habits and routines in school and at work”—rather than calling on it to get you through one self-made crisis after another.
2. Know your limits. Remember, the “supply of willpower is limited, and you use the same resource for many different things.”
3. Recognize when you’re burned out. If you’ve been making lots of decisions and now you’re paralyzed by something simple, give your willpower a rest. “Get some healthy food into your body, wait half an hour, and then the decision won’t seem so overwhelming.”
4. Make plans, but make reasonable plans. “Leave some flexibility and anticipate setbacks.” And be honest: “Force yourself to think about your past.” If a weekly reward system hasn’t worked for you in the past, try something new this time.
5. And, perhaps most importantly, be gentle with yourself. Self-flagellation over breaking down and having a cigarette or a bowl—OK, a pint—of ice cream after a tough day gets you nowhere. Determine what went wrong, eat some healthy food, get a good night’s sleep and make a solid plan for the next day.

Willpower can be our most powerful secret weapon. We just have to learn to use it. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eleanor Brown is the New York Times and international best-selling author of the novel “The Weird Sisters,” and of the fitness inspiration book “WOD Motivation.” She has been doing CrossFit for three years and trains at CrossFit Modig in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.

Joe Henson NYC

ADDITIONAL READING

“Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity” by David Allen

“The War of Art” by Steven Pressfield

“Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” by Amy Chua

“Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us” by Daniel Pink