

The greatest human strength? Believe it or not, it's willpower

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This is the cover of "Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Strength." Credit: Florida State University

Repeat after me: "I will not eat ice cream, I will not eat ice cream, I will not eat ice cream."

Now, behold the luscious waffle cone heaped with scoops of rocky road and vanilla caramel ripple?

Repeat after me: "Well . . . maybe just a little taste"

Arrgh — don't do it!

At least not until you've read the intriguing new book by Florida State

University Professor Roy F. Baumeister and New York Times science writer John Tierney.

"Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength" (The Penguin Press) recently climbed to the top of the charts on the New York Times Bestseller List, making the soft-spoken Baumeister an instant literary celebrity and bringing attention to his decades of research on self-control. In recent weeks, "Willpower" has been reviewed glowingly in the New York Times Sunday Book Review as well as by NPR and the hip website The Daily Beast.

Baumeister, the Francis Eppes Professor of Psychology at FSU and head of the department's graduate program in social psychology, has made a career of researching self and identity, emotion, social rejection and belongingness.

Interest in self-regulation or "willpower" has been around since the 19th century, a popular topic mulled by the Victorians (who thought of it as a form of mental energy) and even Charles Darwin, who considered it in "The Descent of Man."

In his new book, Baumeister admits he was "something of a skeptic" about the subject at first. But after examining willpower in a laboratory setting, he understood "how it gives people the strength to persevere, how they lose self-control as their willpower is depleted, how this mental energy is fueled by the glucose in the body's bloodstream."

He began scrutinizing issues such as self-esteem in the 1970s while still in graduate school, when it was fashionable to study "the self in general and identity crisis," Baumeister said. But self-esteem proved to be disappointing in terms of "not providing the consequences and benefits" he had hoped for, he said, so he moved on to other areas of study, including willpower, which he points out is actually a folk term referring

to a particular strength needed in order to resist temptation.

Baumeister's current research focuses on self-control, choice and decision-making. He has also investigated how people regulate their emotions, resist temptation, break bad habits and perform up to their potential — and why they often fail to do so. In the 1990s, he was part of a social psychology movement that developed a theory about "depletable self-control."

Experiments Baumeister conducted with researchers at Case Western Reserve University — where subjects were offered cookies or radishes and then asked to decipher unsolvable geometric puzzles (guess which group gave up first?) — were corroborated in more than 100 subsequent experiments. The Institute for Scientific Information lists Baumeister among the handful of most cited (and most influential) psychologists in the world.

Baumeister's groundbreaking research into willpower — which dates to the 1990s — shows that self-regulation is a little bit like a muscle: It can sometimes be worn down. When subjects were given a task that required them to resist something — like a sweet treat or not thinking about a certain kind of animal — they didn't perform as well on a subsequent assigned task involving willpower, a result of what Baumeister calls "ego depletion."

Even more interesting was that when the subjects were given a sugar-sweetened drink, self-control was actually improved. Apparently, the sugar provided fuel for the brain to get back to work and restore the person's willpower. And when subjects were asked to make moderate lifestyle changes, such as exercising or tracking dietary habits, they eventually displayed greater overall self-control in their lives, which showed that willpower can be beefed up much like an unused muscle.

Those experiments, which ultimately defined willpower as "a limited resource," made Baumeister realize that he had uncovered something important.

"This was something quite new to the field, in the way we were thinking about the self — and even the way I had understood it," he explained, adding that he knew at the time the research had uncovered something significant. "This was a change," he said. "An exciting new development."

As for our ability to flex that sometimes flabby self-control muscle, take heart: "Our willpower has made us the most adaptable creatures on the planet, and we're rediscovering how to help one another use it," Baumeister muses in his bestseller, which, he admits, took a walloping dose of willpower (and a one-year sabbatical) to write. "We're learning, once again, that [willpower](#) is the virtue that sets our species apart, and that makes each one of us strong."

Provided by Florida State University

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