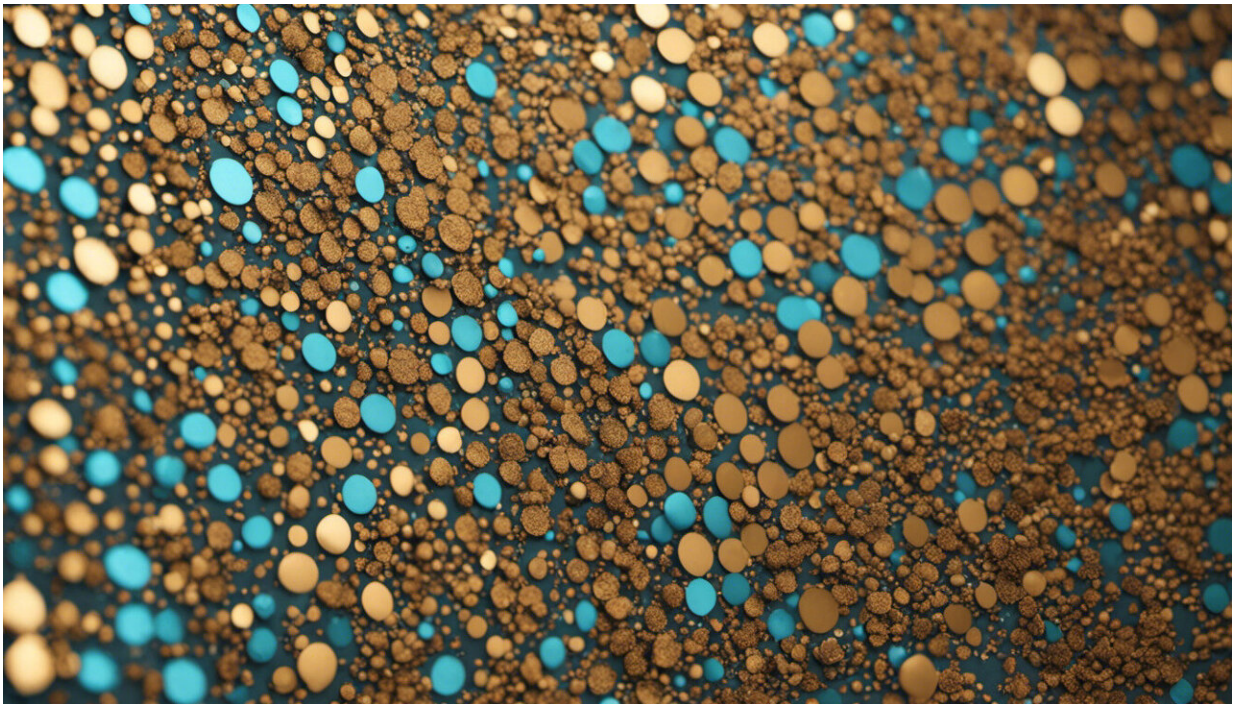


# Study finds lure of entertainment, work hard for people to resist

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Medical Xpress) -- Trying to resist that late-night tweet or checking your work email again? The bad news is that desires for work and entertainment often win out in the daily struggle for self-control, according to a new study that measures various desires and their regulation in daily life.

“Modern life is a welter of assorted desires marked by frequent conflict and resistance, the latter with uneven success,” said Asst. Prof. Wilhelm Hofmann of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. Determining how to best resist desires is not as easy as it seems, say personality and social psychologists presenting new research Jan. 27 in San Diego at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

In the new study of desire regulation, 205 adults wore devices that recorded a total of 7,827 reports about their daily desires. Desires for sleep and sex were the strongest, while desires for media and work proved the hardest to resist. Even though tobacco and alcohol are thought of as addictive, desires associated with them were the weakest, according to the study. Surprisingly to the researchers, sleep and leisure were the most problematic desires, suggesting “pervasive tension between natural inclinations to rest and relax and the multitude of work and other obligations,” said Hofmann, lead author of the study, “Desires and Cravings: Food, Money, Status, Sex,” forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#).

Moreover, the study supported past research that the more frequently and recently people have resisted a desire, the less successful they will be at resisting any subsequent desire. Therefore as a day wears on, willpower becomes lower, and self-control efforts are more likely to fail, said Hofmann, who co-authored the paper with Roy Baumeister of Florida State University and Kathleen Vohs of the University of Minnesota.

Scientists who study the complex interplay between desires and [self-control](#) say that passing up on temptation is made ever more difficult by the idea that there is no single or clear feeling that alerts us to when our willpower is low. “But we find that when willpower is low, everything is felt more intensely,” said Baumeister, author of Willpower:

Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength.“ Low willpower seems to turn up the volume on life.”

In a series of experiments, Baumeister and his colleagues found that people with low willpower reported more distress in response to an upsetting film and rated cold water as more painful during a cold-water immersion test. They also had stronger desires to open a gift and to keep eating cookies.

## **Fighting temptation? Try procrastination**

The effects of willpower depletion explain why so many people have trouble resisting unhealthy food — the more they resist the food, the more they crave it. That’s why one group of researchers is looking at ways people can alter their physical cravings. Asst. Prof. Nicole Mead and her colleagues at Catolica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics tested the notion that postponing consumption of an unhealthy snack to an unspecified future time would reduce the desire for, and therefore consumption of, that snack.

In one experiment, Mead's team gave 105 high school students in the Netherlands a bag of potato chips. Some participants received instructions to either postpone, restrain or consume the potato chips, while others could choose among the three eating strategies. Over the course of one week, students who initially postponed eating the chips subsequently ate the least amount of chips, regardless of whether they chose or were given the strategy. They ate even more than those who were instructed to not eat them at all.

“Postponing consumption is an effective strategy that consumers can use for controlling unwanted, food-related desires,” Mead said. “In modern society, people are absolutely inundated with opportunities to consume, and this strategy may be particularly helpful because it primarily works

through desire reduction rather than willpower enhancement.” Future research will examine whether the strategy works for other transient impulses, such as spending and sexual [desires](#).

In another set of experiments, researchers tested how consumers responded to low-fat foods, such as those they might see at a grocery store. They found that exposure to healthy food cues can signal that a health goal was met and then increase the desire to satisfy the appetite. After viewing either low-fat food items (e.g. diet soda, fat-free cottage cheese) or the regular analog of those items (e.g. regular soda, full-fat cottage cheese), participants indicated their hunger. Subsequently, participants could consume a snack and then rated their recent “healthy behaviors.”

The researchers found that people who viewed the low-fat food felt they had eaten enough healthy food recently and actually increased their consumption. “Merely being exposed to these healthy food cues is enough to arouse hunger and consumption,” said Asst. Prof. Stacey Finkelstein of Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Her team also found that the effect of those food cues was stronger for individuals who are less committed to watching their weight.

Provided by University of Chicago

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