

Study suggests motivation to be active may lead to impulsive behavior

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A new study finds that those primed with words suggesting action are more likely to make impulsive decisions than those primed with words suggesting they pause, stop or rest. Credit: Wordle

Those motivated to actively change bad habits may be setting themselves up for failure, a new study suggests.

The study, described in an article in the journal *Motivation and Emotion*, found that people primed with words suggesting action were more likely than others to make impulsive decisions that undermined their long-term goals. In contrast, those primed to "rest," to "stop" or to be inactive found it easier to avoid impulsive decisions.

"Popular views of self-control maintain that individuals should 'exert' willpower, 'fight' temptations, 'overcome' [desires](#) and 'control' [impulses](#)

when they want to successfully control their own behavior," said University of Illinois graduate student Justin Hepler, who led the study with [psychology professor](#) Dolores Albarracín. "Ironically, in these situations people are often 'fighting' to do nothing – for example, they want to not eat a piece of cake."

"Those who try to be active may make wild, risky investments, for example, and persist in behaviors that clearly make them unsuccessful," Albarracín said.

Hepler, Albarracín and colleagues at Idaho State University and the University of Southern Mississippi wanted to determine whether successful self-control involves the active, effortful pursuit of one's goals, as some researchers have proposed, or whether one is more likely to succeed by "delay(ing) behavior until sufficient pre-action information processing has occurred," as others suggest, the researchers wrote.

In a first experiment, the researchers exposed volunteer participants to words suggesting action ("start," "active," etc.) or inaction ("stop," "pause," etc.) and then tested their self-control by measuring their willingness to forego an immediate monetary reward in exchange for a larger, later one. A second experiment also primed participants with action and inaction words and then tested their impulse control on a simple computer game.

In both experiments, volunteers who were motivated to be active were more likely to select immediate rewards and had poorer impulse control than those who had been primed with words suggesting inaction, the researchers found.

"Overall, these experiments demonstrate that attempting to motivate oneself to be active in the face of temptations may actually lead to

impulsive behaviors," Hepler said. "On the other hand, becoming motivated for inaction or calming oneself down may be the best way to avoid impulsive decisions."

"Of course, inaction words like 'stop' may induce effort directed at decreasing undesirable behavior," Albarracín said. "But these inaction words have been shown to relax individuals, and our research suggests that the relaxed state is better at inhibiting the pull of temptations."

More information: The [paper](#), "Being Active and Impulsive: The Role of Goals for Action and Inaction in Self-Control," is available online.

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