

Self-control isn't in short supply, despite what it looks like

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It might be true that people have a harder time controlling themselves when they are tired at the end of the day, but that doesn't mean that self-control is a limited resource, say authors in the Cell Press publication *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* on January 15th. The trick to fighting that couch potato urge is for you (or your kids) to find pleasure in productive activities.

"The main contribution of the paper is to say that although self-control is harder for people in these moments of fatigue; it's not that people cannot control themselves, it's that they don't feel like controlling themselves, at least on certain tasks," said Michael Inzlicht of the University of Toronto Scarborough. "In short, when people are 'depleted' or fatigued, they experience a change in motivational priorities such that they attend to and work less for things they feel obliged to do and attend to and work more for things they want to do - things they like doing."

Inzlicht's team, including Brandon Schmeichel from Texas A & M University and Neil Macrae from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, defines self-control as the mental processes that allow people to override thoughts and emotions, enabling them to vary behavior adaptively from moment to moment. The dominant view in psychology has been that self-control is a limited resource like energy. Under that view, acts of restraint ultimately exhaust the supply until we are left powerless to control ourselves.

In fact, there is considerable evidence to show that people's performance

does falter after a period of time. However, Inzlicht and his colleagues chock that up to a shift in priorities and not an absence of self-control. That means there might be ways around those hours of dawdling.

We might boost [self-control](#) by changing the way we relate to our goals, Inzlicht says, converting all of those "have-tos" into "want-tos." When that fails, it's worth planning for the unavoidable ups and downs in our motivational state. Steer clear of temptations when our energy levels are low. Take a mental break and refresh.

"Breaks and vacations are not antithetical to productivity, but may actually boost it," Inzlicht said. "Some smart companies already realize this."

In our personal lives, all of this may be more easily said than done, "but it is not impossible," he added. "If someone wants to eat healthier, they should think of the enjoyment that they can get from eating delicious, yet healthy, foods; in contrast, they should probably not frame their eating goal as something they feel obliged to do because their doctor or spouse is trying to convince them to do so. The key is finding a way to want and like the goal that you are chasing. Some people do this naturally - think of the person who loves to run and jogs as a way to relax or take a break."

For the rest of us, who knows, maybe it's not too late for all those unfulfilled or abandoned New Year's resolutions after all.

More information: Paper: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Kats et al.: "Why self-control seems (but may not be) limited."
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ... ii/S1364661313002945](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S1364661313002945)

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