

New research shows remembering self-control failures leads to repeat failures

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It's been said that "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," but even if you know your own history, that doesn't necessarily help you with self-control. New research published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* shows the effectiveness of memory in improving our everyday self-control decisions depends on what we recall and how easily it comes to mind.

"Despite the common belief that remembering our mistakes will help us make better decisions in the present," says the study's lead author, Hristina Nikolova, Ph.D., an assistant professor of Marketing in the Carroll School of Management at Boston College, "we actually find that thinking about our failures at self-control leads us to repeat them and indulge in the present, so it's not helpful at all.

"For example, people often think that remembering the last time when they didn't hesitate to enjoy eating the delicious, 2,000 calorie chocolate cake will help them resist the delicious dessert menu and go for some fruits instead. However, our findings reveal that remembering such self-control failures would lead people to indulge again in the present."

Titled "Haunts or Helps From the Past: Understanding the Effect of Recall on Current Self-Control," the study is the first of its kind and was conducted by Nikolova, Cait Lambertson, associate professor with the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh, and Kelly L. Haws, associate professor with the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University.

In a series of experiments conducted over four years, the authors examine how the content of consumers' recollections (whether they focus on their past successes or failures at self-control) and the difficulty of their recall (whether they recall few or many such instances) impact their decisions in self-control dilemmas such as money budgeting, time budgeting, and persistence on challenging tasks.

For example, in one of the experiments, participants remembered instances in which they were faced with a spending temptation (e.g., being tempted to splurge on an expensive, but unnecessary item that they really liked) and whether they were able to successfully control their spending behavior (self-control successes) or were not able to do so (self-control failures). Some participants were asked to recall two such instances, while others were instructed to recall ten such behaviors.

Subsequently, all participants were asked to imagine they were at a shopping mall and indicate how much [credit card](#) debt they were willing to incur to buy something they had wanted for a long time (e.g., a pair of shoes, a handbag, and a video game). Results revealed that participants who recalled ten successes were willing to incur about 21% more credit card debt than those who recalled just two successes. Furthermore, the groups of participants who recalled two or ten failures were both likely to incur as much credit card debt as those who recalled ten successes.

In sum, the findings of all studies reveal that consumers only show better self-control following reflection on their past under very specific conditions - when they recall their past self-control successes easily.

"For example, when people recall two past successes at self-control (e.g., instances when they resisted spending money on unnecessary items), these instances come to mind easily. It is relatively easy for everyone to think of two such successes. This ease of recall makes people believe that that they are good at self-control, they are the kind of person who

can resist temptations, and since people usually want to be consistent with their views of themselves, they restrain again in tempting situations in the present," says Nikolova.

When participants were asked to recall many successes (ten), they experienced difficulty in coming up with so many examples. This difficulty made them conclude that they must not be that good at self-control if they cannot come up with the required number of successes and these participants indulged more than those who recalled only two successes.

In some ways, remembering less is more. Counterintuitively, recalling only a few past successes helps us restrain ourselves in the present more than recalling many successes.

Making matters worse, if individuals remember failed attempts at self-control, they are likely to repeat them. The authors found that participants who recalled self-control failures engaged in equivalent levels of indulgence regardless of whether they recalled few or many such instances.

Interestingly, mood mixed with memory might be a factor in our everyday self-control and explains why recalling failures is not a good idea.

"When we have to think about our failures - that puts us in a negative mood and research has shown that when people are in a negative mood state, they tend to indulge to make themselves feel better," says Dr. Nikolova.

The research could be used in the real world by marketers who are trying to design programs and interventions to help people with different self-control issues such as credit card debt and unhealthy eating.

Conventional wisdom suggests that remembering our past, and particularly, the mistakes we have made, will help us make better decisions in the present. Programs designed to provide assistance to individuals struggling with self-control issues such as obesity, excessive credit card debt, gambling and other addictive behaviors, appear to follow this intuition, advising people to reflect on their past failures to ensure better restraint in the present.

However, according to the study: "...reflecting on the past is often undesirable."

"We show that while recalling successes seems like a good idea, in cases when such recall is difficult, this strategy may backfire," the study concludes. "Further, compared to easy recall of successes, recalling failures does little to enhance self-control, despite conventional wisdom that one learns from their past mistakes. In fact, our results instead argue that focusing on one's past mistakes may doom us to repeat them. Given that many factors may lead interventions and help programs to fail, every 'nudge' matters—we hope that identifying this danger of recall may help design more effective programs."

Provided by Boston College

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