

Study suggests practicing acts of self-control can make you better at it

January 26 2017, by Bob Yirka



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

(Medical Xpress)—A trio of researchers from China and the U.S. has conducted a study that offers possible evidence of a way to improve self-control—by consistently engaging in self-control acts. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Jianxin Wang, Yulei Rao and Daniel Houser describe experiments they carried

out with volunteers meant to test the idea that people could improve their willpower regarding one activity by periodically engaging in another.

Most people have a reasonably clear idea of how good they are at resisting temptations—some are able to have a single beer at a bar before heading home, for example, while others cannot seem to resist having many. In this new effort, the researchers have designed an experiment to find out if practicing [impulse control](#) might make people better at it.

The experiment consisted of enlisting two types of [volunteers](#) to serve as measures—those who were tolerant of alcohol and those who were not. Those who were tolerant were considered the norm, while those who were intolerant were the kind of people who find themselves wobbling around after just one drink. Prior research has shown that people who are intolerant often find themselves saying no when offered a drink because of the known repercussions—thus, because of their nature, they have had to practice a form of self-control on a fairly regular basis.

All 477 volunteers were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their drinking habits and how they responded to alcohol—each was also tested for sensitivity using a skin patch. Then all of the volunteers were asked to play a dice-rolling game in which participants rolled a die multiple times, but only the first roll counted toward a prize—without witnesses. Each was then asked to report the value of their roll. Unbeknownst to the volunteers, the researchers used a hidden camera that allowed them to see the actual value. In analyzing their results, the researchers found that the alcohol-intolerant participants were less inclined to cheat than their tolerant counterparts. This, the researchers claim, suggests they were better able to demonstrate self-control, which came about due to the practice they had in saying no to alcohol. The researchers thus suggest that people in general might be able to improve their overall [self-control](#) by practicing it with another behavior.

More information: Jianxin Wang et al. An experimental analysis of acquired impulse control among adult humans intolerant to alcohol, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1610902114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1610902114)

Abstract

The ability to control tempting impulses impacts health, education, and general socioeconomic outcomes among people at all ages. Consequently, whether and how impulse control develops in adult populations is a topic of enduring interest. Although past research has shed important light on this question using controlled intervention studies, here we take advantage of a natural experiment in China, where males but not females encounter substantial social pressure to consume alcohol. One-third of our sample, all of whom are Han Chinese, is intolerant to alcohol, whereas the remaining control sample is observationally identical but alcohol tolerant. Consistent with previous literature, we find that intolerant males are significantly more likely to exercise willpower to limit their alcohol consumption than alcohol-tolerant males. In view of the strength model of self-control, we hypothesize that this enables improved impulse control in other contexts as well. To investigate this hypothesis, we compare decisions in laboratory games of self-control between the tolerant and intolerant groups. We find that males intolerant to alcohol and who regularly encounter drinking environments control their selfish impulses significantly better than their tolerant counterparts. On the other hand, we find that female Han Chinese intolerant to alcohol do not use self-control to limit alcohol consumption more than tolerant females, nor do the tolerant and intolerant females exhibit differences in self-control behaviors. Our research indicates that impulse control can be developed in adult populations as a result of self-control behaviors in natural environments, and shows that this skill has generalizable benefits across behavioral domains.

© 2017 Medical Xpress

Citation: Study suggests practicing acts of self-control can make you better at it (2017, January 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-01-self-control.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.