

Wanting more self-control could hinder our efforts to exert self-control, study finds

April 27 2017



Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Turning down that delicious piece of chocolate cake. Resisting the temptation to buy clothes that we don't need. If we want to watch our weight and save our pennies, these enticements demand that we exercise some degree of self-control.

Over the years, research has shown that self-control is a valuable

attribute that allows us to achieve our goals in life, and many intervention programs have been designed to improve our lives by helping us develop more of it. More broadly, parents, educating, governing, and religious institutions—and even the popular media—explicitly push both children and adults to desire and develop more self-control.

But how does wanting self-control impact on our ability to achieve it? A new Bar-Ilan University study, in cooperation with Florida State University and University of Queensland, Australia, has shown that, ironically, wanting to have more self-control could actually be an obstacle to achieving it (regardless of one's actual level of self-control). The study, entitled "The self-control irony: Desire for self-control limits exertion of self-control in demanding settings" was recently published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, an official journal for the Society of Personality and Social Psychology.

To determine the effect of wanting self-control on self-control-related behavior, the researchers conducted a series of four experiments which tested the impact of wanting self-control on performance. Across the four experiments, over six hundred participants were asked to perform tasks that required either much or little self-control. Their desire to have more self-control was either measured (using a new "desire for self-control" scale developed by the researchers) or manipulated (by making people evaluate the benefits of having more self-control. The manipulation served to establish the causal effect of the desire).

The researchers discovered that no matter whether desire is measured or manipulated, those people with a stronger desire for self-control found it more difficult to exert self-control when the task was difficult (that is, it demanded much self-control). The reason for this, they determined, is that when faced with a difficult task, the desire translates into a sense that one doesn't have enough self-control, which causes low self-efficacy

(that is, reduced belief in one's abilities) and, subsequently, disengagement from the task at hand. Of importance, participants' level of trait self-control (their basic predisposition to show self-control) did not affect the findings. That is, a strong desire for self-control had a negative impact on individuals high and low in trait self-control.

"One of the main messages of this paper is that although it's good for society that both children and adults have a high level of self-control, the mere desire for self-control could be an obstacle to achieving it. Thus, while intended to help people gain more self-control, the common practice of driving people to desire more self-control runs the risk of actually undermining their confidence and increasing their doubts that they have the resources to exhibit self-control," says Dr. Liad Uziel, of the Department of Psychology at Bar-Ilan University. Uziel carried out the research with Prof. Roy F. Baumeister, of Florida State University and University of Queensland, who is considered a leading researcher on [self-control](#) in the world, and is one of the most cited of all time in [social psychology](#).

More information: Liad Uziel et al, The Self-Control Irony: Desire for Self-Control Limits Exertion of Self-Control in Demanding Settings, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217695555](#)

Provided by Bar-Ilan University

Citation: Wanting more self-control could hinder our efforts to exert self-control, study finds (2017, April 27) retrieved 8 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-04-self-control-hinder-efforts-exert.html>

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