

# Studying the struggle of self-control

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PhD student Rebecca Olsen says everyone has trouble working towards long-term goals sometimes, whether it's studying, healthy eating, exercise, quitting smoking or saving money.

"Delayed rewards are a contributor to many impulsive behaviours such as [student](#) procrastination, gambling and [drug abuse](#).

"For example, when students procrastinate they are choosing a smaller, immediate [reward](#), such as watching television, over larger rewards that are received in the future, like getting a good grade.

"I have seen many students, including myself, struggle to overcome academic procrastination—so it became a topic I was drawn to for my postgraduate studies."

Ms Olsen says pinpointing how to help [people](#) be more self-controlled in these types of situations would be beneficial for many.

"The act of imagining personal, future events has shown to help people make more self-controlled decisions. This means vividly imagining an event that will happen when you have achieved the long-term goal you're working towards.

"I want to find out how reliable and robust this effect is, and to understand what it is about this act that may help us to be more self-controlled."

Ms Olsen has replicated the self-control enhancing effect of thinking about the future in her experiments. She has also investigated how well people understand the impact of immediate rewards on their own behaviour.

"We asked participants to make a choice—if they would rather have \$100 now or \$200 in one year. Many of them chose \$100, even though they also stated that receiving the delayed, bigger amount would make them happier on a separate questionnaire," she says.

"This tells us that we don't always know how difficult it is to make the self-controlled choice until we're faced with it."

Next, Ms Olsen plans to investigate whether imagining past events also helps people be self-controlled.

Ms Olsen presented her study last week at the [2017 New Zealand Association for Behaviour Analysis conference](#) held at Victoria University's Kelburn campus.

Provided by Victoria University

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