

Effective self-control strategies involve much more than willpower, research shows

February 14 2019



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It's mid-February, around the time that most people waver in their commitment to the resolutions they've made for the new year. Many of these resolutions—whether it's to spend less time looking at screens, eat

more vegetables, or save money for retirement—require us to forego a behavior we want to engage in for the one we think we should engage in. In a new report, leading researchers in behavioral science propose a new framework that outlines different types of self-control strategies and emphasizes that self-control entails more than sheer willpower to be effective.

The report comes at a time when environmental pressures and societal problems are making strategies for boosting [self-control](#) more important than ever, says Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychology professor and one of report's authors.

"Temptations are arguably more readily available, more creatively engineered, and cheaper than any time in history," Duckworth says. "Junk food gets tastier and cheaper every year. And then there's video games, social media, the list goes on. In parallel, there are [public policy issues](#) such as obesity, educational underachievement, and undersaving that result, in part, from failures of self-control."

Duckworth's coauthors on the report—published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science—are Katherine L. Milkman (The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania) and David Laibson (Harvard University). George Loewenstein (Carnegie Mellon University), a leading researcher in the science of decision making, is author of an accompanying commentary.

Based on their comprehensive review of available research, Duckworth, Milkman, and Laibson propose a framework that organizes evidence-based self-control strategies along two dimensions based on how the strategies are implemented and who is initiating them.

They observe that in some cases the best self-control [strategy](#) involves us

changing the situation to create incentives or obstacles that help us exercise self-control, such as using apps that restrict our phone usage or keeping junk food out of the house. In other cases it's more effective to change how we think about the situation—for example, by making an if-then plan to anticipate how we'll deal with treats in the office—so that exercising self-control becomes more appealing or easier to accomplish.

Other strategies work better when someone else implements them for us. For example, our electricity company might use social norms to prompt a change in our thinking, showing us how our energy usage compares with that of our neighbors. And policymakers often use situational constraints to prompt behavior focused on the long-term. Examples range from incentives (e.g., tax rebates for eco-friendly building materials) to penalties (e.g., raising taxes on cigarettes and alcohol). Employers are increasingly using another type of situational constraint, defaults, to encourage employees to save for retirement; many are requiring people to opt out of an employer-provided retirement plan if they don't want to participate.

The strategies, drawing from insights in psychological science and economics, can inform the efforts of policymakers, employers, [healthcare professionals](#), educators, and other practitioners to address pressing issues that stem, at least in part, from failures in self-control, the authors write.

Identifying four types of self-control strategies that go beyond willpower sends an important message, Loewenstein writes in his commentary, given that people often believe willpower is sufficient despite its high failure rate. One of the reasons people tend to fail in their New Year's resolutions is "naivety about the limitations of the brute-force approach and ignorance of the far more effective strategies enumerated in the review," he writes.

But Loewenstein notes some important caveats to keep in mind when interpreting the research, which the researchers also acknowledge in the report. Many studies have examined self-control strategies in small groups of participants over brief periods of time, which raises questions about whether they will remain effective if implemented at a broader scale and how long the effects will last.

Duckworth, Milkman, and Laibson hope that their review helps to integrate existing research on self-control from several disciplines into a comprehensive whole.

"There is an urgent need for a cumulative and applied science of self-control—one that incorporates insights from theoretical traditions in both [psychological science](#) and economics," the researchers write. "We hope this review is a step in that direction."

More information: George Loewenstein, *Self-Control and Its Discontents: A Commentary on Duckworth, Milkman, and Laibson, Psychological Science in the Public Interest* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1529100619828401](#)

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Effective self-control strategies involve much more than willpower, research shows (2019, February 14) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-effective-self-control-strategies-involve-willpower.html>

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