

# Self-control isn't always a good thing—having too much can be bad for your mental health

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Having high self-control is often [seen as a good thing](#). It's believed to be key to success in many aspects of life—whether that's getting a

promotion at work, sticking to your workout regime or resisting the temptation of a sweet treat when you're watching what you eat.

But as suggested by a theory published by Professor Thomas Lynch in 2018, high [self-control](#) may [not always be a good thing](#)—and for some, it could be linked to certain [mental health problems](#).

According to Lynch's theory, every single one of us leans more towards one of two personality styles: undercontrol or overcontrol. The way we tend to lean depends on many factors, including our genes, the behavior that people around us reward and discourage, our [life experiences](#) and the [coping strategies](#) we use in [everyday life](#).

Importantly, being undercontrolled or overcontrolled is neither good or bad. While it makes us more likely to behave in a certain way, most of us are [psychologically flexible](#) and can adapt to the different situations we're put in. So, regardless of whether we're overcontrolled or undercontrolled, this flexibility helps us deal with life's challenges and setbacks in a constructive way.

But both undercontrol and overcontrol [can become problematic](#). This usually happens when a combination of biological, social and personal factors makes us much less flexible.

Most of us are probably more familiar with what problematic undercontrol looks like. People who are [highly undercontrolled](#) may have few inhibitions and struggle to control their emotions. Their behavior may be unpredictable, as it's often dependent on the mood they're in. This can negatively affect their [relationships, education, work, finances and health](#).

There are many therapies out there that can help undercontrolled people. These therapies help them learn to [regulate emotions and increase self-](#)

[control](#). For example, cognitive behavioral therapy aims to teach people control over their [thoughts, behavior and emotions](#). Similarly, dialectical behavior therapy—designed for people who experience emotions very intensely—targets [emotion dysregulation](#).

## Problematic overcontrol

Unfortunately, overcontrol isn't talked about as much. This may be because overcontrolled traits—such as persistence, the ability to make plans and stick to them, striving for perfection and being in control of emotions—are [often highly regarded](#) in our society. But when overcontrol becomes an issue, it can be damaging in many areas of life.

Highly overcontrolled people may struggle to adapt to change. They may be less open to [new experiences](#) and criticism, and be very set in their ways. They may experience bitter feelings of envy towards others and struggle to relax and have fun in [social situations](#). They may also use fewer gestures, rarely smile or cry, and try to hide their emotions at any cost.

Together, these characteristics may make a person more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness. This may ultimately cause their [mental health to worsen](#).

Unfortunately, many of the available psychological therapies [aren't helpful](#) in treating issues of overcontrol. This is because they focus on improving self-control and emotion regulation. But since overcontrolled people already control and regulate too much, they instead need a therapy that can help them learn that sometimes it's okay to [relax and let go](#).

Alongside his theory, Lynch also developed a therapy designed to treat issues of overcontrol—known as [radically open dialectical behavior](#)

[therapy](#). Early studies have shown that the therapy has [a lot of potential](#) in helping overcontrolled people. [It does this](#) by teaching them how to let go of the need to always be in control, be more open about their emotions, better communicate with other people, and be more flexible in the midst of changing situations.

Importantly, this therapy is [transdiagnostic](#), which means it can be helpful regardless of what mental health condition a person might have been diagnosed with before. [Research shows](#) that it may be useful for people who struggle with a range of [mental health](#) conditions—such as [treatment-resistant depression](#), anorexia nervosa and autism spectrum disorders.

But, to receive suitable help, a person must first be correctly identified as highly overcontrolled.

The current assessment of overcontrol is quite long and complex. It involves a few questionnaires and an interview that must be conducted by a specially trained clinician. This can limit access to support and slow down research.

I am working on developing a simplified assessment method that will help promptly identify problematic overcontrol. This will make it easier for researchers to continue studying overcontrol, too.

High self-control is typically admired and highly overcontrolled people are rarely open about their struggles. That's why problematic overcontrol can go unnoticed for a long time. Continued work in this field will hopefully make it easier for people to get the help they need.

Importantly, overcontrol and undercontrol are complex concepts and cannot be self-diagnosed. If you suspect you may be highly overcontrolled or undercontrolled—and especially if it's affecting your

health and well-being—it's important to reach out to a [doctor or therapist](#)

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