

People who use willpower alone to achieve goals, resist temptation, deemed more trustworthy

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People who use willpower to overcome temptations and achieve their goals are perceived as more trustworthy than those who use strategies

that involve external incentives or deterrents—such as swear jars or internet-blocking apps—according to research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"The knowledge that people can use external [commitment](#) strategies to overcome self-control problems has existed in some form for thousands of years. Since at least the time of Homer and Odysseus, the focus has primarily been on the efficacy of these strategies for the person choosing to engage in them," said lead author Ariella Kristal, Ph.D., of Columbia University.

"This prior work has demonstrated, for example, that Odysseus made the right decision to tie himself to the mast rather than attempting to use willpower to resist the sirens in the moment."

Known as commitment strategies, these approaches have been shown to improve success for a variety of goals, including smoking cessation, [weight loss](#), [academic achievement](#) and saving money, according to Kristal. Despite the benefits of commitment strategies, though, little research has been done on how they affect others' perceptions of people using them.

To better understand how people's use of commitment strategies over willpower affects others' perceptions of them, Kristal and her co-author, Julian Zlatev, Ph.D., of Harvard Business School, conducted a series of online experiments involving more than 2,800 participants from the United States.

In most of the experiments, participants were presented with a hypothetical situation involving individuals who attempted to achieve a goal using willpower or a commitment strategy.

In one experiment, they were asked to rate the integrity of hypothetical

individuals who used willpower to avoid an unwanted behavior (e.g., eating [junk food](#) or drinking alcohol) versus paying \$5 every time they engaged in the unwanted behavior. In another scenario, hypothetical individuals either used willpower or an app to avoid distracting websites like Facebook or Instagram.

Overall, individuals who were described as using commitment strategies to achieve their goals were judged to be less trustworthy than those who used willpower alone.

In two experiments, researchers found that participants were more likely to rate hypothetical users of commitment strategies as less trustworthy, even though the participants recognized the strategies were more effective than willpower alone. In another, participants were less likely to choose an external commitment strategy if they thought others might find out.

"People appear particularly hesitant to adopt commitment strategies when their use will be made public and, while not as high, people's resistance continues to remain elevated even when the use of strategies will be kept private," said Kristal. "This occurs despite the fact that people do recognize and acknowledge the benefits of these commitment strategies."

The researchers believe that the choice to use a commitment strategy signals to others a deficiency in an individual's character. That is, people believe those who require external aid (as opposed to using just willpower) are more likely to have failed in the past and therefore are less capable of overcoming self-control problems on their own.

"Past failures of self-control can be seen by others as moral failures. Because morality is an important component of integrity in particular, and trustworthiness more broadly, people who rely on commitment

strategies may be viewed as less trustworthy than those who simply use willpower," said Kristal.

These findings have important implications for developing programs and initiatives that rely on external strategies to help people achieve their goals, according to Kristal. By examining the role of interpersonal judgments in self-control strategy choice, we can begin to understand why people may fail to adopt these beneficial strategies and how to better promote effective strategy use.

More information: Ariella Kristal et al, Going Beyond the "Self" in Self-Control: Interpersonal Consequences of Commitment Strategies, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000385](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000385)

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