

The paradox of temptation

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Does the mere availability of something tempting weaken the will to resist? The answer is of more than theoretical interest to public health experts, and the problem goes far beyond serious addictive disorders. Just think of all those Christmas cookies in your office recently. As our national obesity crisis shows, difficulties with discipline and self-control are widespread and harmful.

Every self-control challenge is a tradeoff of one kind or another, and with chocolates and other desserts it's a tradeoff between satisfying a sweet tooth and commitment to good nutrition. Although it seems intuitively obvious that the dieter should not keep bonbons in every room of the house, psychological theory argues the opposite. According to counteractive self-control theory, we deflate desire for readily available temptation when indulging conflicts with pursuit of more important goals.

Three psychologists recently decided to test the paradoxical view of temptation based on counteractive self-control theory. Kristian Ove Myrseth and Ayelet Fishbach of the University of Chicago and Yaacov Trope of NYU predicted that increasing the availability of sweets would indeed deflate desire for them.

They tested this notion by offering women exiting the gym the choice between Power Bars or chocolates and asked them to rate their desire for each. Simple enough, but here's the twist. Some rated their desire before choosing, and others right after - but before eating. The idea was to compare desire for chocolate when it was readily available, and when it

was made unavailable.

The psychologists figured that young women at a gym would tend to be health conscious - and thus conflicted over the choice. The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that the women did indeed prefer the healthy power bars - that is, they devalued the chocolates. However, this preference disappeared as soon as they made their choice, and the unhealthy temptation was no longer an option. So it appears that self-control does in fact operate paradoxically, by actually diminishing desire for what's tempting and accessible.

The authors suggest that this happens because availability of sweets is threatening to the loftier goal of good health, and so causes the mind to damp down desire to protect the greater good. In short, by making a tempting sweet readily available, we make it less tempting.

But what if you could just change your mind? What if you had the option to ditch the health food and scarf down the chocolate instead? Does the mind keep desire flat for as long as the temptation remains an option? The psychologists decided to test this, but not with chocolates. Instead they created a self-control tradeoff involving work and play. They studied a group of graduate students in the University of Chicago's school of business. Unhappily, these MBA students were enrolled in a really boring, although required, class. The researchers had these students rate the desirability of a number of leisure activities, like going to movies and partying and so forth.

Some rated leisure activity while they still had the option of dropping the boring class. Others did the rating after the deadline had passed for dropping the class. In other words, for some the decision was a done deal, while for others it was reversible. They found that, as long as they had the option of blowing off work for play, they continued to dampen

their urge to play. It appears the mind protects itself against succumbing to temptation for as long as it must, and it does this by devaluing what's most available.

These findings are a bit puzzling, and the authors raise some intriguing questions: Would dieters actually benefit from the sight of the dessert cart rolling by? Should alcoholics keep liquor in the liquor cabinet—paradoxically to help with self-control? The intuitive answer to such questions is no, but the evidence from these studies suggests that it might not be a resounding no.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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