What's the cost of self-control? New study tabulates the bill
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A team of researchers has identified measures we take in order to skirt having to exert self-control in our daily lives—findings that offer new insights into what motivates human behavior.

"The failure to use self-control is a problem that humans face every day, but we know little about the cognitive processes that lie beneath it or the lengths we'll go to avoid needing to implement it," explains Candace Raio, an assistant professor of research in the Department of Psychiatry at NYU Grossman School of Medicine and the lead author of the paper, which appears in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS). "In this study, we were able to determine the price people are willing to pay to remove a tempting food reward—for example a chocolate brownie—which would be placed in front of them for 30 minutes. By examining participants under a range of conditions, the researchers were also able to demonstrate that the cost of self-control increased when subjects were stressed and when they were offered motivational incentives (i.e., a monetary bonus) to avoid eating the tempting food. In both conditions, participants paid more to have temptation removed, a finding with striking implications for the economic costs of stress on behavioral control.

Overall, the researchers found that the more tempting the food item, determined by participants' own ratings, the more these participants were willing to pay to avoid having to exert self-control, suggesting these costs reflect participants' aversion to resisting temptation.
Across these five experiments, Raio and Glimcher were able to index the real economic costs of self-control, in dollars and cents, and show how they relate to real-world temptations.