

Why Self-Control Is an Over-Rated Factor in Self-Improvement

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We Americans are subject to a culture that relentlessly promotes self-improvement and success. Whether it is concerned with personal finance, healthful eating, regular exercise, family relationships, or our job performance, there are a plethora of self-help books on the best seller-lists informing us how we can do better (Schwartz, 2018). An underlying theme in these books is that we can change for the better if we can gain more self-control of our lives.

Unfortunately, the problem of self-control is the problem of life itself. Our tendency to be shortsighted—to go for the short-term over the long-run—comes at a considerable cost. The famous marshmallow experiments (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) at Stanford University dramatically exemplified this problem. These experiments focused on young children who could resist the temptation to immediately eat one sweet with a reward of a second sweet about 15 minutes later. These studies found that those children who could wait—those who exercised self-control—were also the ones who had better academic and professional success years later.

Since then, study after study has linked self-control to self-improvement and achievement in a wide number of personal, academic and professional areas (e.g., Francis & Susman; 2006; Mischel, 2014; Shoda, Mischel, & Peak, 1990). Put simply, those who can persevere toward their long-term goals in the face of distraction to do otherwise—those who have “grit”—are best positioned for success.

In response to these findings, something of a cottage industry has sprung up to inform us how to increase our self-control (e.g., Baumeister & Tierney, 2011; McGonigal, 2012; Rachlin, 2000). But after a few decades of being exposed to this information, not much seems to have changed. We are still spending too much on the day-to-day rather than saving for the future, still continuing to engage in the same old same old rather than doing the harder thing. Why?

The answer is that self-control is over-rated. In choosing to rely on rational analysis and willpower to stick to our goals, we are not disadvantaging ourselves. We are employing tools that are not only inadequate; they are also potentially harmful. If using willpower to keep your nose to the grindstone feels like a struggle, that’s because it is. Your mind is fighting against itself. It’s trying to persuade, entice, and if that fails, suppress a desire for immediate gratification.

Given self-control’s importance for success, it seems as if evolution should have provided us with a tool for implementing it that was less agonizing to use. The reality is

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that evolution has not short-changed us; we are just ignoring it. That tool is our social emotions. These are the emotions like gratitude and compassion that support the positive aspects of social life. For years psychologists has been studying the effects of these emotions on decision-making and behavior. They have found that unlike reason and willpower, these emotions naturally influence us to be patient and persevere. When we are experiencing these emotions, self-control is no longer a battle because they work not by suppressing our desires for satisfaction in the moment, but by increasing our resolve about how much we value the future (DeSteno, Baumann, Bartlett, & Williams, 2010).

We too often think about self-improvement and the pursuit of our goals in bracing, self-punishing terms: I will indulge myself less, I will work harder, I will push through. But it does not have to be that way; self-control is not necessarily about feeling miserable. The research on self-control shows that willpower, for all its benefits, wanes over time. As we try to make ourselves study, work, exercise or save money, the mental effort to keep focused and motivated increases until it seems too difficult to sustain ourselves (DeSteno & Valdesold, 2011).

Even worse, exerting willpower can take a psychological and physical toll. As studies by psychologist Greg Miller (2015) at Northwestern University have shown, willing oneself to be “gritty” can be quite stressful. In one experiment involving some 300 teenagers from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these researchers found that those who were better at exercising self-control did have more success when it came to resisting distractions, but at a cost to their health. Their bodies suffered not only from increased stress responses, but also from premature aging of their immune cells.

At moderate levels, the tendency to pursue achievement through willpower and rational analysis can be and often is effective. But at higher levels, it is a detriment to our well-being—especially if we fail. When people who are highly focused and dedicated to using willpower fall short of their goals, they report a major blow to their well-being that is 120% greater than that reported by those who follow a less austere and stressful path (Nusslock & Miller, 2016).

From an evolutionary perspective, the fact that exercising willpower doesn't come naturally to us makes a lot of sense. For thousands of years, what led to success wasn't our ability to study for exams, save for retirement, go to the gym, or wait for a second marshmallow. For most of our evolutionary history none of these self-focused goals mattered or even existed. It is far more likely that what led to success was strong social bonds—relationships that would encourage people to cooperate and lend support to one another, which helped to ensure that their sacrifices would be returned time and again when required in the future.

But to establish and maintain relationships, people would have had to be fair, honest, generous, diligent, and loyal. They would have had to be perceived as responsible collaborators. In other words, they would have had to behave in a dependable manner (DeSteno, Baumann, Bartlett, & Williamson, 2010). What underlies

these traits is the ability to put something else ahead of our own immediate desires and interests—to exercise self-control. Working hard to keep up our end of a deal or helping another person by giving time, money, food, or a shoulder to cry on all require a willingness to sacrifice some resources in the moment. In exchange, we reap the benefits of those strong relationships down the line.

When it comes to making such short-term sacrifices, most of us don't rely on a cold, rational analysis of costs and benefits. We don't normally calculate what is to be gained by helping someone else. We just *feel* like we should. It's our emotions—specifically, gratitude, compassion and an authentic sense of pride (not hubris)—that influence us to behave in ways that show self-control.

More than a decade's worth of research backs up this picture. For example, studies from psychologist David DeSteno's lab at Northeastern University show that gratitude directly increases self-control. In a version of the marshmallow test adapted for adults, researchers had subjects take a few minutes to recall an event that made them feel grateful, neutral, or happy. Next, they had them answer a series of questions of the form "Would you rather have \$X now or \$Y in Z days?" with Y always being bigger than X, and Z varying over weeks to months. From these questions, they could calculate how much people discounted the value of the future (DeSteno, Li, Dickens, & Lerner, 2014).

Those feeling neutral or happy were pretty impatient. They were willing to forgo receiving \$100 in a year if they could receive \$18 today. Those who were feeling gratitude, however, showed nearly double the self-control. They required at least \$30 to forgo the later reward. In a similar vein, the researchers followed their subjects for three weeks, measuring their levels of daily gratitude, and found the same boost to their self-control. Their research also showed that when we make people feel grateful, they will spend more time helping anyone who asks for assistance, they will make financial decisions that benefit partners equally (rather than ones that allow profit at a partner's expense), and they will show loyalty to those who have helped them even at costs to themselves (DeSteno, Li, Dickens, & Lerner, 2014).

DeSteno and his research associates also found similar results with the emotion of pride. Making people feel proud—not arrogant, but proud of the skills they have—made them more willing to wait for future rewards and more willing to take on leadership roles in groups and work harder to help a team solve a difficult problem. Likewise, when subjects were induced to feel compassion, they were more willing to take on the burden of others, more motivated to spend time and effort to help get others out of jams and ease their distress (Williams & DeSteno, 2008).

What these findings show is that pride, gratitude and compassion, whether we consciously realize it or not, reduce the human mind's tendency to discount the value of the future. In so doing, they push us not only to cooperate with other people but also to help our own future selves. Feeling pride or compassion has been shown to increase perseverance on difficult tasks by over 30% (Williams & DeSteno, 2008). Likewise, gratitude and compassion have been tied to better academic performance, a greater

willingness to exercise and eat healthily, and lower levels of consumerism, impulsivity, and tobacco and alcohol use. If using willpower causes stress, using these emotions actually helps: They slow heart rate, lower blood pressure, and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. By making us value the future more, they ease the way to patience and perseverance (DeSteno & Valdesold, 2011).

Perhaps most importantly, while these emotions enhance self-control, they also combat another problem of modern life: loneliness. From 1985 to 2004, the percentage of people who reported having at least one friend on whom they could rely and with whom they could discuss important matters dropped from 80% to 57% (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Today, more than half of all Americans report feeling lonely, especially in their professional lives. But study after study has shown that those who are seen as grateful and confident draw others to them. Because these emotions automatically make us less selfish, they help ensure we can form relationships with people who will be there to support us when we need it.

Cultivating the social emotions maximizes both our resume virtues (those that underlie professional success) and our eulogy virtues (those for which we want to be personally remembered). In nudging the mind to be more patient and more selfless, they benefit everyone whom our decisions impact, including our own future selves. In sum, they give us not only grit but also grace (Brooks, 2015).

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