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# Self-Control is Like a Muscle

## The Strength Model of Self-Control



### Principle

Self-Control is like the strength of a muscle and can wear out after use, but can also strengthen over time with practice.

### Quote

“Self-control is a complex, biologically expensive form of behavior.”

### So What - Application

If self-control is like a muscle, then we can prepare for situations where we want more self-control. We can rest or take a break. For example, if we have the urge to spend money, eat, or smoke when we don't actually want to, we can rest like we would with a tired muscle, and allow some time for our self-control to replenish.

We can tweak our environments so that they don't require so much self-control, so that our self-control doesn't get depleted.

### The Research Story

Three self-control researchers from Florida State University and University of Minnesota used existing research to propose a “Strength Model” of self-control. Essentially they suggest that self-control is like the strength of a muscle. It can get tired out and depleted. It can be restored (at least temporarily) with rest or some glucose. It can be strengthened with practice. People start conserving their self-control energy when they see they'll need it for a longer time. And when called upon with an incentive or raised stakes, people can reach into their stores of strength and resources and do what needs to be done. Finally, they suggest that there may be a point at which self-control is spent.

Along with willpower, glucose may play a part in willpower wearing out. After using self control in a task, people's blood sugar went down. After drinking a glass of lemonade - their self control went back up, but not when they drank lemonade with diet sweeteners without glucose.

Some things require willpower or self-control and others that don't. Things like habits and rote memory that are controlled automatically by our brain don't seem to be affected by willpower depletion. However processing intensive activities like reasoning, active thinking, extrapolation, or using logic do succumb to willpower depletion.

Managing how you are perceived in interpersonal interactions depletes willpower. For example, in one study they had people have a conversation on racial politics with someone of another race. Afterward, they performed worse on self-control tasks than people who talked racial politics with someone of the same race.

Presenting a desired image also depletes self-control. People who were instructed to try hard to convey a particular image in a video ended up with less self-control to manage their behavior to make a good impression.

Our body and brain uses energy for self-control. The same energy is used for effortful decision making, active response (rather than automatic passive ones), and what many people consider free will or the ability to override impulses, make moral decisions, and choose behaviors based on rational choices. These actions are an expensive use of personal resources.

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