



A Stitch in Time Saves Nine

A Stitch in Time: Strategic Self-Control in High School and College Students



Principles

The earlier you use self-control, the better the results.

It's easier to control the situation than to control yourself.

Quote

“Intervening early in the development of an impulse may be more effective than intervening later.”

So What - Application

If early self-control strategies like choosing or modifying situations to avoid temptation work better than willpower, forcing yourself, or “just saying no,” then how can we implement those strategies?

Think about the impulse you are trying to control. Is it overeating? Needing to study? Getting some work done? Not smoking?

Whatever it is, ask yourself how you can change the environment to remove the temptation. You could keep your phone in another room, remove sweets from the house, or close your youtube browser tabs.

The Research Story

Five researchers from University of Pennsylvania and Stanford studied self-control in high school and college students.

People use self-control strategies when they have an unwanted impulse and want to control it. They may need to study, but have the impulse to scroll on their phone or hang out with friends. In the process model of self-control there's 5 ways you could use self-control

1. You could stay out of or choose to be in a specific situation like staying away from bars to avoid drinking or going to the library to study.
2. You could change your situation like putting sweets in the back of the cupboard, putting your cell phone away, or creating your own deadlines.
3. You could focus your attention somewhere else like looking away or distracting yourself.
4. You could reframe your thoughts like thinking of tobacco as poison or imagining yourself in the balcony of a debate and watching the debate about the behavior.
5. You could use self-control in the heat of the moment like “forcing yourself” to grab an apple instead of a cookie.

In one study they asked 577 high school students to tell a story of a specific incident when they used self-control when they really needed it. What were they trying to do and what actually happened? What did they try to do to be self-controlled. Then they were given three scenarios and asked what they would do. Finally, they were given 5 responses and asked to rate which ones they think would work better. Students ranked early strategies like choosing the situation or modifying it as most effective.

In two more studies, they asked 250 high school and 159 college students to choose a study goal. They then divided them into three groups and told one group to remove temptations rather than trying to resist them (including teaching some examples) and told the second group to exert willpower whenever they were faced with temptation, and they told the third group nothing. Students taught to remove temptations were better able to meet their study goals.

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