



Brian Galla

# Habits Matter More Than Self-Control

## More than Resisting Temptation: Beneficial Habits Mediate the Relationship between Self-Control and Positive Life Outcomes.



### Principle

People with more self-control use it less often in daily life.

People with a lot of self-control often use it to create habits, so in the long run they don't have to use their self-control as often in normal daily life..

### Quote

“Collectively, these results suggest that beneficial habits--perhaps more so than effortful inhibition--are an important factor linking self-control with positive life outcomes.”

### So What - Application

Self control predicts better life outcomes, but less actual use of effortful self-control. Why?

Habits. Instead of resisting temptation, they use their self-control to create automatic habits, which then require less effortful self-control because they are automatic.

That means that developing habits would help me reach my goals. I might focus less on how to gain self-control or use self-control in tempting situations and more effort on how to set up habits that support situations where I might need to exhibit self-control.

### The Research Story

Two researchers from University Pennsylvania studied the relationship between self-control, habits, and positive life outcomes. Self-Control leads to positive life outcomes, but how does this work? You might think that people with self-control spend more time, effort, and energy just saying no or using brute force to control themselves in a moment of temptation. Actually, the opposite is true - people with high self-control use their self-control less. So how does it work then?

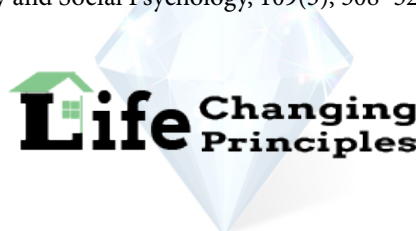
Self-Control leads to creating good habits which then lead to positive life outcomes. Relying on self-control alone is risky because it doesn't work when you're fatigued, doing hard thinking tasks, stressed, or doing several self-control tasks in a row. In addition when you try not to do something, it can backfire like the "Don't think of a white elephant" experiment. These studies tested whether self-control is actually related to good habits.

They did 6 different studies with 2200 people from teens to middle-aged adults using a variety of self-control measures and a variety of good habits including eating, sleeping, studying, homework, and meditation.

- #1 - In a survey of 500 adults, self-control predicted better habits in eating, exercising, and sleeping which reduced need for effortful self-control.
- #2 - In a survey of 142 college students, self-control predicted stronger study habits, which predicted less frustration & rumination if they chose to study instead of going with friends in a hypothetical situation.
- #3 - In a survey of 135 undergrads, self-control predicted better study habits, which predicted studying even in a bad mood, stressed, or not liking it.
- #4 - In a survey of 447 high school students, self-control predicted homework habits, which predicted turning things in on time & engaging in class.
- #5 - In a study of 109 youth who did a 5 day meditation retreat, self-control predicted better meditation habits, which predicted goal outcomes.
- #6 - In a study of 918 high school seniors, self-control predicted homework habits, which predicted GPA and making it through the first year of college. Self-control works twice as well on automatic (habitual) behaviors than on behaviors that require conscious self-control.

In summary, why do people with high self-control use it less, but still achieve good life outcomes? Because they have habits that make behavior automatic and effortless and those habits, at least in part, create the good results. Individuals with better self-control rely on beneficial habits and routines.

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