



Can You Train Self-Control?

Does self-control improve with practice? Evidence from a six-week training program.



Principle

Practicing self-control doesn't increase your self-control.

Quote

“Despite high levels of adherence to the training tasks, there was no effect of training on any measure of self-control. Trained participants did not, for example, show reduced ego depletion effects, become better at overcoming their habits, or report exerting more self-control in everyday life.”

So What - Application

If self-control doesn't improve with practice, then we have to let go of the idea that willpower is going to change our habits or be relied on to resist temptation.

Instead, we can use other strategies. Other research has found that people with high self-control don't use it. Instead, they actively avoid or reduce temptation. We can change the environment to reduce our exposure to temptation. We can also goal loop our goals to check in with current reality and what we want.

The Research Story

Six researchers from the UK and North Carolina wanted to know if you could practice self-control to strengthen it.

They split 174 UK college students into 4 groups. The behavior training group practiced using their non-dominant hand. The cognitive training group practiced the stroop task and stop-signal task described below. The active control group practiced math problems, and the no-contact group filled out a weekly questionnaire. Each group practiced 5 days a week for 6 weeks.

How do you train self-control? One is to do a behavior that you don't normally do, in this study they asked participants to use their nondominant hand for all daily activities. Another way is the stroop task where color words are printed in the right or wrong color and you try to read them and stop yourself from reading the color instead of the actual word. The stop-signal task measures impulse control - are you able to click boxes arrows are pointing to, but the stop yourself when you hear a beep.

The idea seems to be, if you can stop yourself from doing something, then you have self-control. If you can stop yourself from using our dominant hand, a well-ingrained habit, or if you can stop yourself from clicking a button you've been trained to click, then you have self-control. And if you practice these things then you'll get better at self-control.

How did they measure whether people improved their self-control? They tested handgrip endurance, tiring tasks like number searches, vigilance, and math with distraction, and in-lab measures with eating chocolate and racial bias. They rated daily self-control diary entries about negative and positive behaviors, how they spent money, healthy and unhealthy snacks, and alcohol consumption. They also did an overall well-being survey before and after training.

They found that the groups that practiced self-control did not improve any differently than the groups that didn't practice self-control in any of their measures. It seems that practicing resisting temptation in this moment doesn't make you better equipped to resist temptation in the next moment.

Miles, E., Sheeran, P., Baird, H., Macdonald, I., Webb, T. L., & Harris, P. R. (2016). Does self-control improve with practice? Evidence from a six-week training program. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 145(8), 1075–1091. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000185>

