



Marina Milyavskaya

Avoiding Temptation to Reach Goals

What's so great about self-control? Examining the importance of effortful self-control and temptation in predicting real-life depletion and goal attainment

Principle

When you experience temptations, it's draining whether or not you resist them.

Quote

“contrary to conventional wisdom, self-control was unimportant in accomplishing one's goals..

Surprisingly, temptation was also experienced as depleting, even when there were no attempts to suppress the tempta-

So What - Application

If actively resisting temptation doesn't get us to our goals, we may need to rethink our approaches.

And if temptation wears us out even if we don't put effort into resisting it, then avoiding temptation in the first place seems the best practice.

Another strategy is to develop habits which create new automatic responses to cues and bypass the need for self-control.

The Research Story

Two researchers from Carleton University and University of Toronto explored whether it's being good at resisting temptation or avoiding temptation is more associated with reaching your goals. They also wanted to know whether exposure to temptation depletes your self-control.

They gave 159 college freshman (107 finished) questionnaires for self-control and personality and asked them to choose 4 goals. Three weeks later they pinged them at 5 random times every day for a week and asked about the desires they were experiencing, whether the desire conflicted with one of their goals, how much they tried to resist the desire, and how mentally exhausted they were in the moment. In addition, each evening they responded to a different set of questions. Then at the end of the semester they were asked about their goal progress.

In this study, there is a difference between being good at self-control as a general trait and using active, self-control that takes effort right now in the moment. They measured both and found that trait self-control predicted how well they could avoid temptations, but didn't predict how good people were at effortful self-control in the moment.

They found that how good people are at using effort to resist temptation in the moment didn't play a role in how well they accomplished their goals.

When you go after goals, there's a dance between automatic impulses and the effort it takes to resist them. You would think that increasing the effort of self-control would be the answer. However, it turns out that avoiding temptation in the first place is better. Relying on self-control tires you out because it takes effort, which leaves you vulnerable to giving in to temptation. So, in a way, relying on self-control backfires in reaching for goals.

A surprising finding is that it's not just putting effort into self-control in the face of temptations that's tiring. It's also tiring just to experience temptation even if you don't try to control it. This could be because of the internal load of having to decide whether to exercise self-control or not. That means that avoiding temptation in the first place not only creates less risk for giving in, but also gives you more energy to go after your goals.

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