



Over-estimating Self Control

The Restraint Bias: How the Illusion of Self-Restraint Promotes Impulsive Behavior



Principle

People overestimate their impulse control, so they over-expose themselves to temptation.

Quote

“This biased perception of restraint had important consequences for people’s self-control strategies. Inflated self-control beliefs led people to overexpose themselves to temptation, thereby promoting impulsive behavior.”

So What - Application

If you think you’re good at self-control, then you don’t mind putting yourself in harm’s way - going to places you normally smoke or having candy around the house, for example. These additional temptations cause people to fail or relapse more often.

Realizing that we, like most people, probably overestimate our self control can help us change our environments and keep ourselves out of temptation for the changes we are trying to make.

The Research Story

Three researchers from Northwestern University and University of Amsterdam did four studies on how people overestimate their self-control because they underestimate the power of their bodies to drive impulsive behavior to get what it needs. This underestimation is called an empathy gap - we don’t truly understand how powerful our body-driven impulses are.

In the first study, 72 students were given either a tiring task or a neutral task. The fatigued students estimated that they had less control over mental fatigue and planned to leave less time to study for the last week.

In the second study, 79 students were selected as they either entered or exited the cafeteria. They were asked to rank 7 snacks and told they would get 4 Euros and the snack if they returned it uneaten in a week. Full students thought they could handle the temptation and chose one of their top two favorite snacks. Hungry students thought they had less self-control and chose their second or third favorite snack to reduce temptation. A week later 39 students returned the snack. More hungry students returned the snack, especially the ones who had chosen a less favored snack because they had exposed themselves to less temptation.

In the third study, they assigned 53 heavy smokers to a high control or low control group. The groups took a bogus test and the high control group was told they had high self control, while the low control group told they had low self control. They then played a game where they watched a movie coffee and cigarettes and could earn \$2 keeping an unlit cigarette in the other room, \$4 on the desk, \$6 in their hands, or \$8 in their mouth and still not smoke it. The high control group chose more tempting situations thinking they could handle it and they ended up smoking more.

In the fourth study they asked 55 smokers who had been smoke free for 3 weeks questions to estimate their capacity to control cravings and how much temptation they exposed themselves to. Four months later the smokers who thought they had more self-control exposed themselves to more temptation and ended up relapsing and smoking more.

People tend to have a restraint bias and overestimate their capacity to control impulses, which causes them to expose themselves to more temptation.

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