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Pump Up Your Self-Discipline Muscle by Flexing Your Will (and Won't) Power

By Susanne Gaddis, Ph.D.

Like an athlete in training for a major competition, it took several long years of study, self-discipline and financial sacrifice to train to be RN. In order to study and pass your nursing exams, you made many disciplined decisions to dedicate your time, money and effort in order to achieve this goal. And now that you've achieved your admirable objective, do you find that you're still showing that same steely resolve and fierce willpower in your job?

Pumping up your "willpower muscle" in your day-to-day career can mean a variety of things: Keeping timeliness a priority; making follow-through a must (not a maybe); giving co-workers extra help and effort in a needed area, as well as many other will-powered efforts. And sometimes willpower even means flexing your "won't power" brawn – using self-restraint, like saying "no thanks" to idle gossip and water cooler-rumors.

"Willpower can be defined as initiating activity, or the ability to do things that are difficult or frustrating. Won't power is the ability to not initiate activity that you wish to do," explained Angela Duckworth, doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania and advanced graduate student of nationally recognized "Authentic Happiness" guru Marty Seligman. "Everyone has an intuitive sense of whether or not a person has self-discipline. People can be disciplined about, say, working hard, but find themselves unable to resist other temptations, like procrastination, drinking, gambling and smoking."

So ask yourself: "Do the goals that you currently have require **"willpower"** or **"won't power?"**

Self-Control as Child's Play

It's a scientific fact, self-control can be measured. And it seems that this attribute can show up early in life, sometimes as young as four years of age.

Case in point: Self-control (or self-discipline, self-regulation) can be defined as the ability to delay impulse in the service of a goal (a conquest of the reasoning brain over the impulsive one; a sign of emotional intelligence). The importance of this trait to success was shown in an experiment begun in the 1960s by psychologist Walter Mischel at a preschool on the Stanford University campus.

Mischel told a room of preschoolers that they could have a single marshmallow treat right now. However, if they would wait while the experimenter ran an errand, they would be rewarded with two marshmallows. Some preschoolers grabbed the marshmallow immediately, yet others were able to wait (for what must have seemed an endless) 20 minutes. To sustain themselves in their struggle for self-restraint, some covered their eyes (so they wouldn't see the temptation), others rested their heads on their arms, talked to themselves, sang, and some even tried to sleep. These determined kids got the two-marshmallow reward.

The interesting part of this experiment came in the follow-up studies. The children who as four-year-olds had been able to wait for the two marshmallows were, as adolescents, still able to delay gratification in pursuing their goals. They were more socially competent and self-assertive, and better able to cope with life's frustrations. Conversely, the kids who grabbed the one marshmallow were, as adolescents, more likely to be stubborn, indecisive and stressed.

In general, though, infants and toddlers are not good at controlling themselves and that the part of the brain that is implicated in self-control does not really fully mature in people until the early 20s, Duckworth explained.

Muscle Willpower: A Limited resource

In the simplest of terms, self-control can be viewed as a muscle. Roy F. Baumeister, Ph.D., a professor at Case Western Reserve University, explained that, like a muscle, if you try to constantly (and without respite), exert your self-control, it won't work. It will wear itself out. In other words, you will fatigue the self-control muscle by over-using it. His recommendation is to exert, and then rest, and then exert, and then rest – in this way you may be able to become more self-disciplined by “growing” your strength.

“From a practical point of view, you can view the model of self-control as a limited resource,” Duckworth said, “If you're a nurse in a stressful environment, doing things (both emotionally and physically) that you don't want to, well, after a long 10-hour shift, like any muscle that gets worn-out, you're more likely to break a self-control mechanism – yell at your spouse, break your diet, and so on. Think about it: Most people don't break their diet and raid the refrigerator at 10 a.m. in the morning. This usually happens at the end the day when their 'willpower muscle' is much weaker.”

A great way to refill your “willpower reservoir” when the tank is running on empty is to catch a nap, listen to a joke, get a hug, watch a funny movie, etc. But there are times when relaxation, sleep, a change in scheduling or a “time out” is not possible. In these times, it may be viable to – rather than change your behavior – change your environment. “As a nurse, you can make an excuse to get out of a difficult conversation, decreasing your self-control demands. You can then postpone the meeting to a time when your self-control reserves are higher... If you're at the 'end of your rope,' then don't schedule an emotionally difficult session or workout,” Duckworth noted.

Implementation Intentions

It is possible to double or even triple your chance of achieving a specific goal if you pre-think (think ahead and indicate) how you are going to execute the goal. Peter Gollwitzer, Ph.D, does this by having people use specific how, where, when, what objectives, such as: "If _____ happens, then I will do _____." Now name five things that you need to do: "When it is _____ I will do _____."

Gollwitzer has people delegate the initiation of goal-directed behavior to environmental stimuli by forming so-called implementation intentions. Again, he uses the: "If situation **x** is encountered, I will perform behavior **y**" theory. He has observed that forming implementation intentions helps in detecting, attending to, and recalling the critical situation. Moreover, in the presence of the critical situation the initiation of the specified goal-directed behavior is immediate, efficient, and does not need a conscious intent.

Forming implementation intentions can be used as an effective self-regulatory tool when it comes to resisting temptations, avoiding to stereotype members of an out-group, blocking unwanted goal pursuits and more. Plus, action control via implementation intentions seems to save a person's self-regulatory resources.

Nine Steps to Develop More Self-Control

According to coping.org (www.coping.org), an onsite manual for coping with a variety of life's stressors (authored by: James J. Messina, Ph.D., & Constance M. Messina, Ph.D.), there are nine steps to take in assessing, managing and developing your self-control muscle:

(1) First, you need to identify the areas of your life you need to gain more self-control: In your personal life? (balanced diet, love of self, self-esteem, compulsive and/or addictive behaviors [such as eating, shopping, cleaning, alcohol, drugs, sex, smoking, crisis-oriented activity, excessive activity, body image, etc.].

Or do you need to review your relationships with fixers, helpers, caretakers and enablers? (overdependency, manipulation, helplessness, lack of emotional boundaries, etc.) What about your work life? (time & stress management, workaholism, fear of success, assertiveness, self-image as worker, self recognition of accomplishments, handling perfectionism) And finally, your community life? (need for support system, involvement with others, participation in clubs and activities, handling competition & leadership).

(2) Once you have identified the various issues in which you need to develop more self-control, then you need to identify which emotions tend to lead you to be more out of control. Use the list of emotions and feelings clusters to identify for each issue out of control, which emotions or feelings tend to exacerbate the loss of control.

Emotions that lead to being out of control

Emotion	Feeling cluster
Boredom	listless, unoccupied, restless, uneasy, a need for novelty, change, or excitement
Anger	rage, hate, cheated, infuriated, spiteful, mean, mad, or envious
Guilt	ashamed, miserable, remorse, blamed, distraught, or pain
Depression	left out, ugly, empty, powerless, victimized, suffering, useless, low, sad, helpless, discouraged, or troubled
Anxiety	overstressed, out of control, nervous, overwhelmed, uneasy, tense, pressured, panicked, troubled, confused, or shocked
Loneliness	unwanted, unappreciated, left out, ignored, unloved, alone, hurt, neglected, ugly, or rejected
Fear	afraid, tense, anxious, nervous, weak, worried, skeptical, frightened, threatened, panicked
Excitability	eager, driven, energetic, capable, turned on, enthusiastic, motivated, or clever
Comfort	proud, refreshed, appreciated, satisfied, accomplished, useful, respected, content, confident, full, calm, or relaxed
Happiness	good, nice, glad, loved, pleased, wanted, wonderful, delighted, or beautiful

(Courtesy of coping.org)

(3.) Once you have identified what feelings and emotions tend to exacerbate your loss of control, next identify what irrational beliefs lead to increased loss of control in each of these issues.

(4.) Then you need to identify new, rational, reality-based, healthy thinking, which will lead to your gaining control over these issues. Some self-affirmations are: "I am capable of controlling myself," and: "I will take control of my behaviors," and: "Changing old behaviors takes effort, time, and a motivation to change and I am willing to give all three of these to gain control of my life," and: "I am a capable, lovable person who deserves to let go of the uncontrolled ways of my past so that I can grow, flourish, and be successful in my attempts to gain control in my life," and finally: "I will make time for the work to develop my self-control."

(5.) Once you have identified healthy self-talk, then you need to identify positive actions or behaviors that will assist you to develop self-control in your life. Such behaviors or actions are: stress reduction, improved time management planning and scheduling, an exercise program five to seven times a week, a balanced diet, altering relationships with people, places and things, keeping a personal journal, changing patterns/routines of daily life, avoid settings that arouse negative emotions, and watch out for HALT (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired) situations which could lead to a relapse of out-of-control behaviors.

(6.) Once you have identified the set of healthy actions that assist the development of self-control, develop a plan of action for each issue.

(7.) Once your plans of action are developed, implement them one at a time, taking one issue at a time to get under control. To decide which issues to take first, prioritize the issues.

(8.) Once you have prioritized the issues to be worked on, begin to implement the plans of action to get them under your control.

(9.) If after a time you find that you are still out of control, then return to first step and begin again.

In the end, with time, effort and regular “exert-and-relax” muscle-toning workouts, your willpower and won’t power strength can be in powerfully pumped-up shape!

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. With a specialized expertise in healthcare communication, Susanne delivers workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations across the United States. For more information, or to book Dr. Gaddis for an upcoming conference or event call 919-933-3237 or visit: www.communicationsdoctor.com.