

I Will, I Won't, I Want: What Willpower Is, and Why It Matters

When you think of something that requires willpower, what's the first thing that comes to mind? For most of us, the classic test of willpower is resisting temptation, whether the temptress is a doughnut, a cigarette, a clearance sale, or a one-night stand. When people say, "I have no willpower," what they usually mean is, "I have trouble saying no when my mouth, stomach, heart, or (fill in your anatomical part) wants to say yes." Think of it as "I won't" power.

But saying no is just one part of what willpower is, and what it requires. After all, "Just say no" are the three favorite words of procrastinators and coach potatoes worldwide. At times, it's more important to say yes. All those things you put off for tomorrow (or forever)? Willpower helps you put them on today's to-do list, even when anxiety, distractions, or a reality TV show marathon threaten to talk you out of it. Think of it as "I will" power—the ability to do what you need to do, even if part of you doesn't want to.

"I will" and "I won't" power are the two sides of self-control, but they alone don't constitute willpower. To say *no* when you need to say no, and

yes when you need to say yes, you need a third power: the ability to remember what you really want. I know, you think that what you really want *is* the brownie, the third martini, or the day off. But when you're facing temptation, or flirting with procrastination, you need to remember that what you *really* want is to fit into your skinny jeans, get the promotion, get out of credit card debt, stay in your marriage, or stay out of jail. Otherwise, what's going to stop you from following your immediate desires? To exert self-control, you need to find your motivation when it matters. This is "I want" power.

Willpower is about harnessing the three powers of I will, I won't, and I want to help you achieve your goals (and stay out of trouble). As we'll see, we human beings are the fortunate recipients of brains that support all of these capacities. In fact, the development of these three powers—I will, I won't, and I want—may define what it means to be human. Before we get down to the dirty business of analyzing why we fail to use these powers, let's begin by appreciating how lucky we are to have them. We'll take a quick peek into the brain to see where the magic happens, and discover how we can train the brain to have more willpower. We'll also take our first look at why willpower can be hard to find, and how to use another uniquely human trait—self-awareness—to avoid willpower failure.

WHY WE HAVE WILLPOWER

Imagine this: It is 100,000 years ago, and you are a top-of-the-line homo sapiens of the most recently evolved variety. Yes, take a moment to get excited about your opposable thumbs, erect spine, and hyoid bone (which allows you to produce some kind of speech, though I'll be damned if I know what it sounds like). Congratulations, too, on your ability to use fire (without setting yourself on fire), and your skill at carving up buffalo and hippos with your cutting-edge stone tools.

Just a few generations ago, your responsibilities in life would have been

so simple: 1. Find dinner. 2. Reproduce. 3. Avoid unexpected encounters with a *Crocodylus anthropophagus* (that's Latin for "crocodile that snacks on humans"). But you live in a closely knit tribe and depend on other homo sapiens for your survival. That means you have to add "not piss anyone off in the process" to your list of priorities. Communities require cooperation and sharing resources—you can't just take what you want. Stealing someone else's buffalo burger or mate could get you exiled from the group, or even killed. (Remember, other homo sapiens have sharp stone tools, too, and your skin is a lot thinner than a hippo's.) Moreover, you might need your tribe to care for you if you get sick or injured—no more hunting and gathering for you. Even in the Stone Age, the rules for how to win friends and influence people were likely the same as today's: Cooperate when your neighbor needs shelter, share your dinner even if you're still hungry, and think twice before saying "That loincloth makes you look fat." In other words, a little self-control, please.

It's not just your life that's on the line. The whole tribe's survival depends on your ability to be more selective about whom you fight with (keep it out of the clan) and whom you mate with (not a first cousin, please—you need to increase genetic diversity so that your whole tribe isn't wiped out by one disease). And if you're lucky enough to find a mate, you're now expected to bond for life, not just frolic once behind a bush. Yes, for you, the (almost) modern human, there are all sorts of new ways to get into trouble with the time-tested instincts of appetite, aggression, and sex.

This was just the beginning of the need for what we now call willpower. As (pre)history marched on, the increasing complexity of our social worlds required a matching increase in self-control. The need to fit in, cooperate, and maintain long-term relationships put pressure on our early human brains to develop strategies for self-control. Who we are now is a response to these demands. Our brains caught up, and voilà, we have willpower: the ability to control the impulses that helped us become fully human.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

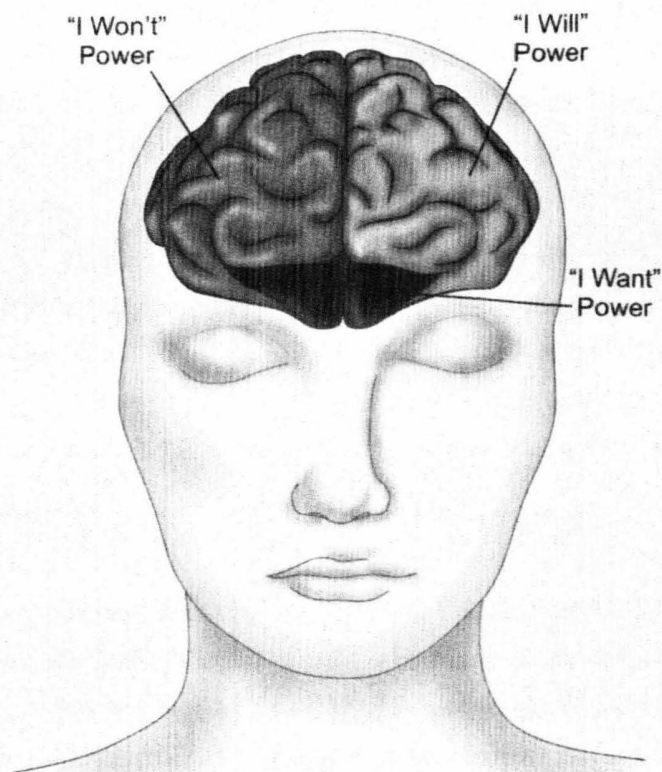
Back to modern-day life (you can keep your opposable thumbs, of course, though you may want to put on a little more clothing). Willpower has gone from being the thing that distinguishes us humans from other animals to the thing that distinguishes us from each other. We may all have been born with the capacity for willpower, but some of us use it more than others. People who have better control of their attention, emotions, and actions are better off almost any way you look at it. They are happier and healthier. Their relationships are more satisfying and last longer. They make more money and go further in their careers. They are better able to manage stress, deal with conflict, and overcome adversity. They even live longer. When pit against other virtues, willpower comes out on top. Self-control is a better predictor of academic success than intelligence (take that, SATs), a stronger determinant of effective leadership than charisma (sorry, Tony Robbins), and more important for marital bliss than empathy (yes, the secret to lasting marriage may be learning how to keep your mouth *shut*). If we want to improve our lives, willpower is not a bad place to start. To do this, we're going to have to ask a little more of our standard-equipped brains. And so let's start by taking a look at what it is we're working with.

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF I WILL, I WON'T, AND I WANT

Our modern powers of self-control are the product of long-ago pressures to be better neighbors, parents, and mates. But how exactly did the human brain catch up? The answer appears to be the development of the prefrontal cortex, a nice chunk of neural real estate right behind your forehead and eyes. For most of evolutionary history, the prefrontal cortex mainly controlled physical movement: walking, running, reaching, pushing—a kind of proto-self-control. As humans evolved, the prefrontal cortex got bigger and better

connected to other areas of the brain. It now takes up a larger portion of the human brain than in the brains of other species—one reason you'll never see your dog saving kibble for retirement. As the prefrontal cortex grew, it took on new control functions: controlling what you pay attention to, what you think about, even how you feel. This made it even better at controlling what you *do*.

Robert Sapolsky, a neurobiologist at Stanford University, has argued that the main job of the modern prefrontal cortex is to bias the brain—and therefore, you—toward doing “the harder thing.” When it’s easier to stay on the couch, your prefrontal cortex makes you want to get up and exercise. When it’s easier to say yes to dessert, your prefrontal cortex remembers the reasons for ordering tea instead. And when it’s easier to put that project off until tomorrow, it’s your prefrontal cortex that helps you open the file and make progress anyway.



Willpower in the Brain

The prefrontal cortex is not one unified blob of gray matter; it has three key regions that divvy up the jobs of I will, I won't, and I want. One region, near the upper left side of the prefrontal cortex, specializes in "I will" power. It helps you start and stick to boring, difficult, or stressful tasks, like staying on the treadmill when you'd rather hit the shower. The right side, in contrast, handles "I won't" power, holding you back from following every impulse or craving. You can thank this region for the last time you were tempted to read a text message while driving, but kept your eyes on the road instead. Together, these two areas control what you *do*.

The third region, just a bit lower and in the middle of the prefrontal cortex, keeps track of your goals and your desires. It decides what you *want*. The more rapidly its cells fire, the more motivated you are to take action or resist temptation. This part of the prefrontal cortex remembers what you *really* want, even when the rest of your brain is screaming, "Eat that! Drink that! Smoke that! Buy that!"

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: WHAT IS THE HARDER THING?

Every willpower challenge requires doing something difficult, whether it's walking away from temptation or *not* running away from a stressful situation. Imagine yourself facing your specific willpower challenge. What is the harder thing? What makes it so difficult? How do you feel when you think about doing it?

A MIND-BLOWING CASE OF WILLPOWER LOST

How important is the prefrontal cortex for self-control? One way to answer that question is to look at what happens when you lose it. The most famous case of prefrontal cortex brain damage is the story of Phineas Gage. And fair warning, this is a gory story. You might want to put down your sandwich.

In 1848, Phineas Gage was a twenty-five-year-old foreman for a gang of rail workers. His employers called him their best foreman, and his team respected and liked him. His friends and family called him quiet and respectful. His physician, John Martyn Harlow, described him as exceptionally strong in both mind and body, "possessing an iron will and an iron frame."

But all that changed on Wednesday, September 13, at four-thirty p.m. Gage and his men were using explosives to clear a path through Vermont for the Rutland and Burlington Railroad. Gage's job was to set up each explosion. This procedure had gone right a thousand times, and yet this time, something went wrong. The explosion happened too soon, and the blast sent a three-foot, seven-inch tamping iron straight into Gage's skull. It pierced his left cheek, blew through his prefrontal cortex, and landed thirty yards behind him, carrying some of Gage's gray matter with it.

You might now be picturing Gage, flat on his back, instantly killed. But he didn't die. By witness reports, he didn't even pass out. Instead, his workers put him in an oxcart and pushed him almost a mile back to the tavern where he was staying. His physician patched him up as well as possible, replacing the largest fragments of skull recovered from the accident site, and stretching the scalp to cover the wounds.

Gage's full physical recovery took over two months (set back perhaps as much by Dr. Harlow's enthusiasm for prescribing enemas as by the persistent fungus growing out of Gage's exposed brain). But by November 17, he was sufficiently healed to return to his regular life. Gage himself reported "feeling better in every respect," with no lingering pain.

Sounds like a happy ending. But unfortunately for Gage, the story doesn't end there. His outer wounds may have healed, but something strange was happening inside Gage's brain. According to his friends and coworkers, his personality had changed. Dr. Harlow described the changes in a follow-up to his original medical report of the accident:

The balance . . . between his intellectual faculties and his animal propensities seems to have been destroyed. He is fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting

but little deference for his fellows, impatient of restraint or advice when it conflicts with his desires . . . devising many plans of future operation, which are no sooner arranged than they are abandoned. . . . In this regard his mind was radically changed, so decidedly that his friends and acquaintances said he was “no longer Gage.”

In other words, when Gage lost his prefrontal cortex, he lost his will power, his won't power, and his want power. His iron will—something that had seemed like an unshakable part of his character—had been destroyed by the tamping iron that blew through his skull.

Most of us don't have to worry about ill-timed railroad explosions robbing us of our self-control, but we all have a little Phineas Gage in us. The prefrontal cortex is not always as reliable as we'd like. Many temporary states—like being drunk, sleep-deprived, or even just distracted—inhibit the prefrontal cortex, mimicking the brain damage that Gage sustained. This leaves us less able to control our impulses, even though our gray matter is still safe in our skulls. Even when our brains are well rested and sober, we aren't fully out of danger. That's because while we all have the capacity to do the harder thing, we also have the desire to do exactly the opposite. This impulse needs to be restrained, and as we'll see, it often has a mind of its own.

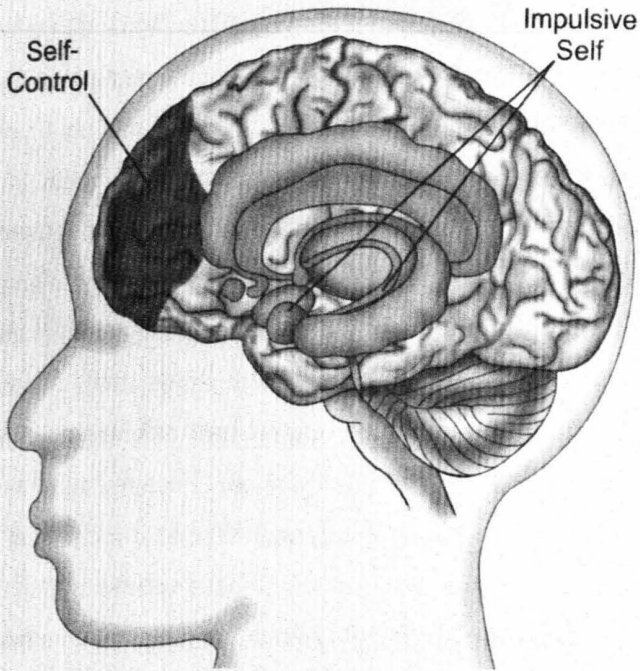
THE PROBLEM OF TWO MINDS

When we watch our willpower fail—spending too much, eating too much, wasting time, and losing our tempers—well, it can make a person wonder if he has a prefrontal cortex at all. Sure, it might be *possible* to resist temptation, but that doesn't guarantee that we will. It's *conceivable* that we could do today what begs to be done tomorrow, but more often than not, tomorrow wins. For this frustrating fact of life, you can also give evolution a big thanks. As humans evolved, our brains didn't so much change as they

grew. Evolution prefers to add on to what it's created, rather than start from scratch. So as humans required new skills, our primitive brain was not replaced with some completely new model—the system of self-control was slapped on top of the old system of urges and instincts.

That means that for any instinct that once served us well, evolution has kept it around—even if it now gets us into trouble. The good news is, evolution has also given us a way to handle the problems we run into. Take, for example, our taste buds' delight in the foods most likely to make us fat. An insatiable sweet tooth once helped humans survive when food was scarce and extra body fat was life insurance. Fast-forward to our modern environment of fast food, junk food, and Whole Foods, and there is more than enough to go around. Extra weight has become a health risk, not an insurance policy, and the ability to *resist* tempting foods is more important for long-term survival. But because it paid off for our ancestors, our modern brains still come equipped with a well-preserved instinct to crave fat and sweets. Fortunately, we can use the brain's more recently evolved self-control system to override those cravings and keep our hands out of the candy bowl. So while we're stuck with the impulse, we're also equipped with the impulse control.

Some neuroscientists go so far as to say that we have one brain but two minds—or even, two people living inside our mind. There's the version of us that acts on impulse and seeks immediate gratification, and the version of us that controls our impulses and delays gratification to protect our long-term goals. They're both us, but we switch back and forth between these two selves. Sometimes we identify with the person who wants to lose weight, and sometimes we identify with the person who just wants the cookie. This is what defines a willpower challenge: Part of you wants one thing, and another part of you wants something else. Or your present self wants one thing, but your future self would be better off if you did something else. When these two selves disagree, one version of us has to override the other. The part of you that wants to give in isn't bad—it simply has a different point of view about what matters most.



The Problem of the Two Minds

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: MEET YOUR TWO MINDS

Every willpower challenge is a conflict between two parts of oneself. For your own willpower challenge, describe these competing minds. What does the impulsive version of you want? What does the wiser version of you want? Some people find it useful to give a name to the impulsive mind, like “the cookie monster” to the part of you that always wants instant gratification, “the critic” to the part of you that likes to complain about everyone and everything, or “the procrastinator” to the person who never wants to get started. Giving a name to this version of yourself can help you recognize when it is taking over, and also help you call in your wiser self for some willpower support.

THE VALUE OF BOTH SELVES

It's tempting to think about the self-control system as being the infinitely superior "self," and our more primitive instincts as an embarrassing vestige of our evolutionary past. Sure, back when our knuckles dragged in the dirt, those instincts helped us survive long enough to pass on our genes. But now they just get in the way, leading to health problems, empty bank accounts, and sexual encounters we have to apologize for on national television. If only we civilized creatures weren't still burdened with the drives of our long-ago ancestors.

Not so fast. Though our survival system doesn't always work to our advantage, it is a mistake to think we should conquer the primitive self completely. Medical case studies of people who have lost these instincts through brain damage reveal how crucial our primitive fears and desires are for health, happiness, and even self-control. One of the strangest cases involved a young woman who had part of her midbrain destroyed during a brain surgery to stop seizures. She appeared to lose the ability to feel fear and disgust, which robbed her of two of the most instinctive sources of self-restraint. She developed a habit of stuffing herself with food until she got sick, and could frequently be found sexually propositioning family members. Not exactly a model of self-control!

As we'll see throughout this book, without desires we'd become depressed, and without fear we'd fail to protect ourselves from future danger. Part of succeeding at your willpower challenges will be finding a way to take advantage of, and not fight, such primitive instincts. Neuroeconomists—scientists who study what the brain does when we make decisions—have discovered that the self-control system and our survival instincts don't always conflict. In some cases, they cooperate to help us make good decisions. For example, imagine that you're walking through a department store, and something shiny catches your eye. Your primitive brain shrieks, "Buy it!" Then you check out the price tag: \$199.99. Before you saw the outrageous price, you would have needed some serious prefrontal cortex intervention to shut down the spending impulse. But what if your brain registers

an instinctive pain response to the price? Studies show that this actually happens—the brain can treat a hefty price tag like a physical punch to the gut. That instinctive shock is going to make the job easy for your prefrontal cortex, and you'll barely need to exert any "I won't" power. As we aim to improve our willpower, we'll look for ways to use every bit of what it means to be human—including our most primitive instincts, from the desire for pleasure to the need to fit in—to support our goals.

THE FIRST RULE OF WILLPOWER: KNOW THYSELF

Self-control is one of mankind's most fabulous upgrades, but it's not our only distinction. We also possess self-awareness: the ability to realize what we are doing as we do it, and understand why we are doing it. With any luck, we can also predict what we're likely to do *before* we do it, giving us ample opportunity to reconsider. This level of self-awareness appears to be uniquely human. Sure, dolphins and elephants can recognize themselves in a mirror, but there's little evidence that they search their souls for self-understanding.

Without self-awareness, the self-control system would be useless. You need to recognize when you're making a choice that requires willpower; otherwise, the brain always defaults to what is easiest. Consider a smoker who wants to quit. She needs to recognize the first sign of a craving, and where it's likely to lead her (outside, in the cold, fumbling with a lighter). She also needs to realize that if she gives in to the craving this time, she's more likely to smoke again tomorrow. One more look in the crystal ball, and she'll see that if she continues on this path, she'll end up with all those horrible diseases she learned about in health class. To avoid this fate, she needs to make a conscious choice not to smoke the cigarette. Without self-awareness, she's doomed.

This may sound simple, but psychologists know that most of our choices are made on autopilot, without any real awareness of what's driving them, and certainly without serious reflection on their consequences. Heck, most of the time, we don't even realize we're making a choice. For example, one study asked people how many food-related decisions they made in one day. What would you say? On average, people guessed fourteen. In reality, when

these same folks carefully tracked their decisions, the average was 227. That's more than two hundred choices people were initially unaware of—and those are just the decisions related to eating. How can you control yourself if you aren't even aware that there is something to control?

Modern society, with its constant distractions and stimulation, doesn't help. Baba Shiv, a professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, has shown that people who are distracted are more likely to give in to temptations. For example, students trying to remember a telephone number are 50 percent more likely to choose chocolate cake over fruit at a snack cart. Distracted shoppers are more susceptible to in-store promotions, and more likely to go home with items not on their shopping lists.*

When your mind is preoccupied, your impulses—not your long-term goals—will guide your choices. Texting as you stand in line waiting to order at the coffee shop? You might just find yourself asking for a mocha milk shake instead of an iced coffee. (Incoming text msg: Bet u don't want 2 know how many calories r in that drink.) Can't get your mind off work? You might just find yourself agreeing with the salesperson that you need the upgrade and unlimited-service package.

WILLPOWER EXPERIMENT: TRACK YOUR WILLPOWER CHOICES

To have more self-control, you first need to develop more self-awareness. A good first step is to notice when you are making choices related to your willpower challenge. Some will be more obvious, such as, "Do I go to the gym after work?" The impact of other decisions might not be clear until later in

*The researchers helpfully point out that anything that "reduces the availability of processing resources in the shopping environment is likely to increase impulse buying by consumers. Marketers . . . could therefore benefit from actions designed to constrain processing resources such as having distracting music or displays in the shopping environment." This, no doubt, explains the chaos that greets me when I walk into the local drugstore.

the day, when you see their full consequences. For example, did you choose to pack your gym bag so you wouldn't have to go home first? (Smart! You'll be less likely to make excuses.) Did you get caught up in a phone call until you were too hungry to go straight to the gym? (Oops! You'll be less likely to exercise if you have to stop for dinner first.) For at least one day, track your choices. At the end of the day, look back and try to analyze when decisions were made that either supported or undermined your goals. Trying to keep track of your choices will also reduce the number of decisions you make while distracted—a guaranteed way to boost your willpower.

AN E-MAIL ADDICT TAKES THE FIRST STEP TO RECOVERY

Michele, a thirty-one-year-old radio show producer, was constantly checking e-mail on her computer or her phone. It was disrupting her productivity at work and annoying her boyfriend, who could never manage to get Michele's full attention. Her willpower challenge for the class was to check e-mail less, and she set an ambitious goal of checking no more than once an hour. After the first week, she reported that she did not come even close to her goal. The problem was that she often didn't even realize that she was checking her e-mail until after she was scrolling through new messages. She could stop once she realized what she was doing, but whatever impulse led her to look at her phone or click over to her e-mail was happening outside of conscious awareness. Michele set the goal to catch herself sooner in the process.

By the next week, she was able to notice when she was reaching for her phone or opening her e-mail. That gave her an opportunity to practice stopping before she got fully sucked in. The impulse to check was more elusive. Michele had trouble recognizing what was prompting her to check *before* she was in the process of checking. With time, though, she came to recognize a feeling almost like an itch—a tension in her brain and body

that was relieved when she checked her e-mail. That observation was fascinating to Michele; she had never thought of checking e-mail as a way to relieve tension. She had thought she was just seeking information. As she paid attention to how she felt after she checked, Michele realized that checking her e-mail was as ineffective as scratching an itch—it just made her itch more. With this awareness of both the impulse and her response, she had much more control over her behavior, and even surpassed her original goal to check less often outside of work hours.

This week, commit to watching how the process of giving in to your impulses happens. You don't even need to set a goal to improve your self-control yet. See if you can catch yourself earlier and earlier in the process, noticing what thoughts, feelings, and situations are most likely to prompt the impulse. What do you think or say to yourself that makes it more likely that you will give in?

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN FOR WILLPOWER

It took evolution millions of years to deliver a prefrontal cortex that is capable of everything we humans need. So perhaps it's a little greedy to ask this, but is it possible to make our brains even better at self-control, without having to hang around for another million? If a basic human brain is pretty good at self-control, is there anything we can do right now to improve on the standard model?

Since the dawn of time, or at least since researchers started poking and prodding the human brain, it was assumed that the brain was fixed in structure. Whatever brainpower you had was a done deal, not a work in progress. The only change your brain was going to see was the deterioration of getting old. But over the last decade, neuroscientists have discovered that, like an eager student, the brain is remarkably responsive to experience. Ask your brain to do math every day, and it gets better at math.

Ask your brain to worry, and it gets better at worrying. Ask your brain to concentrate, and it gets better at concentrating.

Not only does your brain find these things easier, but it actually remodels itself based on what you ask it to do. Some parts of the brain grow denser, packing in more and more gray matter like a muscle bulking up from exercise. For example, adults who learn how to juggle develop more gray matter in regions of the brain that track moving objects. Areas of the brain can also grow more connected to each other, so they can share information more quickly. For example, adults who play memory games for twenty-five minutes a day develop greater connectivity between brain regions important for attention and memory.

But brain training isn't just for juggling and remembering where you left your glasses—there is growing scientific evidence that you can train your brain to get better at self-control. What does willpower training for your brain look like? Well, you could challenge your “I won't” power by planting temptation traps around your home—a chocolate bar in your sock drawer, a martini station by your exercise bike, the photo of your very married high school sweetheart taped to the fridge. Or you could build your own “I will” power obstacle course, with stations that require you to drink wheat grass juice, do twenty jumping jacks, and file your taxes early.

Or you could do something a lot simpler and less painful: meditate. Neuroscientists have discovered that when you ask the brain to meditate, it gets better not just at meditating, but at a wide range of self-control skills, including attention, focus, stress management, impulse control, and self-awareness. People who meditate regularly aren't just better at these things. Over time, their brains become finely tuned willpower machines. Regular meditators have more gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, as well as regions of the brain that support self-awareness.

It doesn't take a lifetime of meditation to change the brain. Some researchers have started to look for the smallest dose of meditation needed to see benefits (an approach my students deeply appreciate, since not many are going to head off to the Himalayas to sit in a cave for the next decade).

These studies take people who have never meditated before—even folks who are skeptical of the whole thing—and teach them a simple meditation technique like the one you'll learn just ahead. One study found that just three hours of meditation practice led to improved attention and self-control. After eleven hours, researchers could see those changes in the brain. The new meditators had increased neural connections between regions of the brain important for staying focused, ignoring distractions, and controlling impulses. Another study found that eight weeks of daily meditation practice led to increased self-awareness in everyday life, as well as increased gray matter in corresponding areas of the brain.

It may seem incredible that our brains can reshape themselves so quickly, but meditation increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, in much the same way that lifting weights increases blood flow to your muscles. The brain appears to adapt to exercise in the same way that muscles do, getting both bigger and faster in order to get better at what you ask of it. So if you're ready to train your brain, the following meditation technique will get the blood rushing to your prefrontal cortex—the closest we can get to speeding up evolution, and making the most of our brains' potential.

WILLPOWER EXPERIMENT: A FIVE-MINUTE BRAIN-TRAINING MEDITATION

Breath focus is a simple but powerful meditation technique for training your brain and increasing willpower. It reduces stress and teaches the mind how to handle both inner distractions (cravings, worries, desires) and outer temptations (sounds, sights, and smells). New research shows that regular meditation practice helps people quit smoking, lose weight, kick a drug habit, and stay sober. Whatever your "I will" and "I won't" challenges are, this five-minute meditation is a powerful brain-training exercise for boosting your willpower.

Here's how to get started:

1. *Sit still and stay put.*

Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the ground, or sit cross-legged on a cushion. Sit up straight and rest your hands in your lap. It's important not to fidget when you meditate—that's the physical foundation of self-control. If you notice the instinct to scratch an itch, adjust your arms, or cross and uncross your legs, see if you can feel the urge but not follow it. This simple act of staying still is part of what makes meditation willpower training effective. You're learning not to automatically follow every single impulse that your brain and body produce.

2. *Turn your attention to the breath.*

Close your eyes or, if you are worried about falling asleep, focus your gaze at a single spot (like a blank wall, not the Home Shopping Network). Begin to notice your breathing. Silently say in your mind "inhale" as you breathe in and "exhale" as you breathe out. When you notice your mind wandering (and it will), just bring it back to the breath. This practice of coming back to the breath, again and again, kicks the prefrontal cortex into high gear and quiets the stress and craving centers of your brain.

3. *Notice how it feels to breathe, and notice how the mind wanders.*

After a few minutes, drop the labels "inhale/exhale." Try focusing on just the feeling of breathing. You might notice the sensations of the breath flowing in and out of your nose and mouth. You might sense the belly or chest expanding as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out. Your mind might wander a bit more without the labeling. Just as before, when you notice yourself thinking about something else, bring your attention back to the breath. If you need help refocusing, bring yourself back to the breath by saying "inhale" and "exhale" for a few rounds. This part of the practice trains self-awareness along with self-control.

Start with five minutes a day. When this becomes a habit, try ten to fifteen minutes a day. If that starts to feel like a burden, bring it back down to five. A short practice that you do every day is better than a

long practice you keep putting off to tomorrow. It may help you to pick a specific time that you will meditate every day, like right before your morning shower. If this is impossible, staying flexible will help you fit it in when you can.

BEING BAD AT MEDITATION IS GOOD FOR SELF-CONTROL

Andrew felt like a terrible meditator. The fifty-one-year-old electrical engineer was convinced that the goal of meditation was to get rid of all thoughts and empty the mind. Even when he was focused on his breath, other thoughts sneaked in. He was ready to give up on the practice because he wasn't getting better at it as quickly as he hoped, and figured he was wasting his time if he wasn't able to focus perfectly on the breath.

Most new meditators make this mistake, but the truth is that being "bad" at meditation is exactly what makes the practice effective. I encouraged Andrew—and all the other frustrated meditators in class—to pay attention not just to how well they were focusing *during* the meditation, but how it was affecting their focus and choices during the rest of the day.

Andrew found that even when his meditation felt distracted, he was more focused after practicing than if he skipped it. He also realized that what he was doing in meditation was exactly what he needed to do in real life: catch himself moving away from a goal and then point himself back at the goal (in this case, focusing on the breath). The meditation was perfect practice for when he was just about to order something salty and deep-fried for lunch, and needed to stop and order something healthier. It was perfect practice for when he had a sarcastic comment on his lips and needed to pause and hold his tongue. And it was perfect practice for noticing when he was wasting time at work and needed to get back on track. All day long, self-control was a process of noticing that he was off-goal and redirecting himself to the goal. With this realization, Andrew no longer cared if his whole ten-minute meditation was spent getting distracted

and coming back to the breath. The “worse” the meditation, the better the practice for real life, as long he was able to notice when his mind was wandering.

Meditation is not about getting rid of all your thoughts; it's learning not to get so lost in them that you forget what your goal is. Don't worry if your focus isn't perfect when meditating. Just practice coming back to the breath, again and again.

THE LAST WORD

Thanks to the architecture of the modern human brain, we each have multiple selves that compete for control of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Every willpower challenge is a battle among these different versions of ourselves. To put the higher self in charge, we need to strengthen the systems of self-awareness and self-control. When we do, we will find the willpower and the *want* power to do the harder thing.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Idea: Willpower is actually three powers—I will, I won't, and I want—that help us to be a better version of ourselves.

Under the Microscope

- *What is the harder thing?* Imagine yourself facing your willpower challenge, and doing the harder thing. What makes it hard?
- *Meet your two minds.* For your willpower challenge, describe your two competing selves. What does the impulsive version of you want? What does the wiser version of you want?

Willpower Experiments

- *Track your willpower choices.* For at least one day, try to notice every decision you make related to your willpower challenge.
- *Five-minute brain-training meditation.* Focus on your breath using the words “inhale” and “exhale” in your mind. When your mind wanders, notice, and bring it back to the breath.