THE
WILLPOWER
INSTINCT

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The willpower instinct: how self-control works, why it matters, and what you can do to get more of it
by Kelly McGonigal
(Penguin Press)
1. Will. 2. Self-control. I. Title.
BF420.M463 2012
153.8 410.25

Printed in the United States of America
7 9 11 8 6

Book design by Meggan Curran

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This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever struggled with temptation, addiction, procrastination, or motivation—which is to say, all of us.
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Acknowledgments

Notes
The intelligent want self-control; children want candy.

—Rumi
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Whenever I mention that I teach a course on willpower, the nearly universal response is, “Oh, that’s what I need.” Now more than ever, people realize that willpower—the ability to control their attention, emotions, and desires—influences their physical health, financial security, relationships, and professional success. We all know this. We know we’re supposed to be in control of every aspect of our lives, from what we eat to what we do, say, and buy.

And yet, most people feel like willpower failures—in control one moment but overwhelmed and out of control the next. According to the American Psychological Association, Americans name lack of willpower as the number-one reason they struggle to meet their goals. Many feel guilty about letting themselves and others down. Others feel at the mercy of their thoughts, emotions, and cravings, their lives dictated by impulses rather than conscious choices. Even the best-controlled feel a kind of exhaustion at keeping it all together and wonder if life is supposed to be such a struggle.
As a health psychologist and educator for the Stanford School of Medicine's Health Improvement Program, my job is to help people manage stress and make healthy choices. After years of watching people struggle to change their thoughts, emotions, bodies, and habits, I realized that much of what people believed about willpower was sabotaging their success and creating unnecessary stress. Although scientific research had much to say that could help them, it was clear that these insights had not yet become part of public understanding. Instead, people continued to rely on worn-out strategies for self-control. I saw again and again that the strategies most people use weren't just ineffective—they actually backfired, leading to self-sabotage and losing control.

This led me to create "The Science of Willpower," a class offered to the public through Stanford University's Continuing Studies program. The course brings together the newest insights about self-control from psychology, economics, neuroscience, and medicine to explain how we can break old habits and create healthy habits, conquer procrastination, find our focus, and manage stress. It illuminates why we give in to temptation and how we can find the strength to resist. It demonstrates the importance of understanding the limits of self-control, and presents the best strategies for training willpower.

To my delight, "The Science of Willpower" quickly became one of the most popular courses ever offered by Stanford Continuing Studies. The first time the course was offered, we had to move the room four times to accommodate the constantly growing enrollment. Corporate executives, teachers, athletes, health-care professionals, and others curious about willpower filled one of the largest lecture halls at Stanford. Students started bringing their spouses, children, and coworkers to class so they could share the experience.

I had hoped the course would be useful to this diverse group, who came to the class with goals ranging from quitting smoking and losing weight to getting out of debt and becoming a better parent. But even I was surprised by the results. A class survey four weeks into the course found that 97 percent of students felt they better understood their own behavior, and 84
percent reported that the class strategies had already given them more willpower. By the end of the course, participants told stories of how they had overcome a thirty-year addiction to sweets, finally filed their back taxes, stopped yelling at their children, stuck to an exercise program, and generally felt better about themselves and more in charge of their choices. Course evaluations called the class life-changing. The consensus of the students was clear: Understanding the science of willpower gave them strategies for developing self-control, and greater strength to pursue what mattered most to them. The scientific insights were as useful for the recovering alcoholic as the e-mail addict, and the self-control strategies helped people resist temptations as varied as chocolate, video games, shopping, and even a married coworker. Students used the class to help meet personal goals such as running a marathon, starting a business, and managing the stresses of job loss, family conflict, and the dreaded Friday morning spelling test (that’s what happens when moms start bringing their kids to class).

Of course, as any honest teacher will tell you, I learned a lot from my students as well. They fell asleep when I droned on too long about the wonder of a scientific finding but forgot to mention what it had to do with their willpower challenges. They were quick to let me know which strategies worked in the real world, and which fell flat (something a laboratory study can never tell you). They put creative spins on weekly assignments and showed me new ways for turning abstract theories into useful rules for everyday life. This book combines the best scientific insights and practical exercises from the course, using the latest research and the acquired wisdom of the hundreds of students who have taken the class.

TO SUCCEED AT SELF-CONTROL, YOU NEED TO KNOW HOW YOU FAIL

Most books on changing behavior—whether it’s a new diet plan or a guide to financial freedom—will help you set goals and even tell you what to
do to reach them. But if identifying what we wanted to change were sufficient, every New Year’s resolution would be a success and my classroom would be empty. Few books will help you see why you aren’t already doing these things, despite knowing full well that you need to do them.

I believe that the best way to improve your self-control is to see how and why you lose control. Knowing how you are likely to give in doesn’t, as many people fear, set yourself up for failure. It allows you to support yourself and avoid the traps that lead to willpower failures. Research shows that people who think they have the most willpower are actually the most likely to lose control when tempted.* For example, smokers who are the most optimistic about their ability to resist temptation are the most likely to relapse four months later, and overoptimistic dieters are the least likely to lose weight. Why? They fail to predict when, where, and why they will give in. They expose themselves to more temptation, such as hanging out with smokers or leaving cookies around the house. They’re also most likely to be surprised by setbacks and give up on their goals when they run into difficulty.

Self-knowledge—especially of how we find ourselves in willpower trouble—is the foundation of self-control. This is why both “The Science of Willpower” course and this book focus on the most common willpower mistakes we all make. Each chapter dispels a common misconception about self-control and gives you a new way to think about your willpower challenges. For every willpower mistake, we’ll conduct a kind of autopsy: When we give in to temptation or put off what we know we should do, what leads to our downfall? What is the fatal error, and why do we make it? Most important, we will look for the opportunity to save our future selves from this fate. How can we turn the knowledge of how we fail into strategies for success?

*This bias is not unique to willpower—for example, people who think they are the best at multitasking are actually the most distractible. Known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, this phenomenon was first reported by two Cornell University psychologists who found that people overestimate their abilities in all sorts of areas, including sense of humor, grammar, and reasoning skills. The effect is most pronounced among people who have the least skill; for example, those with a test score in the 12th percentile would, on average, estimate themselves to be in the 62nd percentile. This explains, among other things, a large percentage of American Idol auditions.
At the very least, by the time you finish the book, you will have a better understanding of your own imperfect but perfectly human behavior. One thing the science of willpower makes clear is that everyone struggles in some way with temptation, addiction, distraction, and procrastination. These are not individual weaknesses that reveal our personal inadequacies—they are universal experiences and part of the human condition. If this book did nothing else but help you see the common humanity of your willpower struggles, I would be happy. But I hope that it will do far more, and that the strategies in this book will empower you to make real and lasting changes in your life.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

BECOME A WILLPOWER SCIENTIST

I’m a scientist by training, and one of the very first things I learned is that while theories are nice, data is better. So I’m going to ask you to treat this book like an experiment. A scientific approach to self-control isn’t limited to the laboratory. You can—and should—make yourself the subject of your own real-world study. As you read this book, don’t take my word for anything. After I’ve laid out the evidence for an idea, I’m going to ask you to test that idea in your own life. Collect your own data to find out what is true and what works for you.

Within each chapter, you’ll find two kinds of assignments to help you become a willpower scientist. The first I call “Under the Microscope.” These prompts ask you to pay attention to how an idea is already operating in your life. Before you can change something, you need to see it as it is. For example, I’ll ask you to notice when you are most likely to give in to temptation, or how hunger influences your spending. I’ll invite you to pay attention to how you talk to yourself about your willpower challenges, including what you say to yourself when you procrastinate, and how you judge your own willpower failures and successes. I’ll even ask you to conduct some field studies, such as sleuthing out how retailers use store design
to weaken your self-control. With each of these assignments, take the approach of a nonjudgmental, curious observer—just like a scientist peering into a microscope, hoping to discover something fascinating and useful. These aren’t opportunities to beat yourself up for every willpower weakness, or to rail against the modern world and all its temptations. (There’s no place for the former, and I’ll take care of the latter.)

You’ll also find “Willpower Experiments” throughout each chapter. These are practical strategies for improving self-control based on a scientific study or theory. You can apply these willpower boosts immediately to real-life challenges. I encourage you to have an open mind about each strategy, even the ones that seem counterintuitive (and there will be plenty). They’ve been pilot-tested by students in my course, and while not every strategy works for everyone, these are the ones that earned the highest praise. The ones that sounded good in theory but embarrassingly flopped in real life? You won’t find them in these pages.

These experiments are a great way to break out of a rut and find new solutions for old problems. I encourage you to try different strategies and collect your own data about which help you the most. Because they are experiments, not exams, you can’t fail—even if you decide to try the exact opposite of what the science suggests (after all, science needs skeptics). Share the strategies with your friends, family, and colleagues, and see what works for them. You’ll always learn something, and you can use what you’ve learned to refine your own strategies for self-control.

Your Willpower Challenge
To get the most out of this book, I recommend picking a specific willpower challenge to test every idea against. We all have willpower challenges. Some are universal—for example, thanks to our biological instinct to crave sugar and fat, we all need to restrain the urge to single-handedly keep the local bakery in business. But many of our willpower challenges are unique. What you crave, another person might be repulsed by. What you’re addicted to, another person might find boring. And what you put
off, another person might pay to do. Whatever the specifics, these challenges tend to play out in the same way for each of us. Your craving for chocolate is not so different from a smoker’s craving for a cigarette, or a shopaholic’s craving to spend. How you talk yourself out of exercising is not so different from how someone else justifies not opening the past-due bills, and another person puts off studying for one more night.

Your willpower challenge could be something you’ve been avoiding (what we’ll call an “I will” power challenge) or a habit you want to break (an “I won’t” power challenge). You could also choose an important goal in your life that you’d like to give more energy and focus to (an “I want” power challenge)—whether it’s improving your health, managing stress, honing your parenting skills, or furthering your career. Because distraction, temptation, impulse control, and procrastination are such universal human challenges, the strategies in this book will be helpful for any goal you choose. By the time you finish the book, you’ll have greater insight into your challenges and a new set of self-control strategies to support you.

**Take Your Time**

This book is designed to be used as if you were taking my ten-week course. It’s divided into ten chapters, each of which describes one key idea, the science behind it, and how it can be applied to your goals. The ideas and strategies build on each other, so that what you do in each chapter prepares you for the next.

Although you could read this whole book in one weekend, I encourage you to pace yourself when it comes to implementing the strategies. Students in my class take an entire week to observe how each idea plays out in their own lives. They try one new strategy for self-control each week, and report on what worked best. I recommend that you take a similar approach, especially if you plan to use this book to tackle a specific goal such as losing weight or getting control over your finances. Give yourself time to try out the practical exercises and reflect. Pick one strategy from each chapter—whichever seems most relevant to your challenge—rather than trying out ten new strategies at once.
You can use the ten-week structure of the book anytime you want to make a change or achieve a goal—just as some students have taken the course multiple times, focusing on a different willpower challenge each time. But if you intend to read the whole book first, enjoy—and don’t worry about trying to keep up with the reflections and exercises as you go. Make a note of the ones that seem most interesting to you, and return to them when you’re ready to put the ideas into action.

Let’s Begin

Here’s your first assignment: Choose one challenge for our journey through the science of willpower. Then meet me in Chapter 1, where we’ll take a trip back in time to investigate where this thing called willpower comes from—and how we can get more of it.

Under the Microscope: Choose Your Willpower Challenge

If you haven’t already, now’s the time to pick the willpower challenge to which you’d most like to apply the ideas and strategies in this book. The following questions can help you identify the challenge you’re ready to take on:

• “I will” power challenge: What is something that you would like to do more of, or stop putting off, because you know that doing it will improve the quality of your life?
• “I won’t” power challenge: What is the “stickiest” habit in your life? What would you like to give up or do less of because it’s undermining your health, happiness, or success?
• “I want” power challenge: What is the most important long-term goal you’d like to focus your energy on? What immediate “want” is most likely to distract you or tempt you away from this goal?