

# The Limits and Possibilities of Willpower

by Amy Chang Radosevich, MA, ACSM, ACE, AFAA



*It's not that some people have willpower and some don't. It's that some people are ready to change and others are not. - James Gordon, M.D.*

It's never too early to plan ahead. So let's start planting a seed as we head into Fall – the season of holidays! While holidays can be a time to give thanks and be joyful for some, it can be stressful and full of temptations for others. During times like this, we may have to call on our willpower to resist overindulging on holiday treats and to make extra efforts to hit the gym. I often hear people say, "Oh I can't make it to the gym because I don't have as much willpower as you do" or "I wish I have willpower like you to resist the temptation of these donuts in front of me!" Is it true that some people are just more gifted genetically and have limitless willpower where others suffer a deficiency of it? Can we increase our willpower if we train ourselves, just like we would train to lift more, run faster and jump higher? I came across a research article that may give us some valuable insights.

Willpower is the ability to ignore temporary pleasure or discomfort to pursue a longer-term goal. In a society that is always in search of instant gratification, it is no wonder that willpower seems like an endangered trait or virtue. Interestingly, based on Baumeister's (2003) research, willpower operates like a muscle. In other words, it can be strengthened but can also be fatigued. The good news here is while willpower is not limitless, it can be increased via training and we can prioritize where to use it so we don't waste it on the trivial things.

Before we talk about how to strengthen our willpower, we need to know that willpower is not just a mindset but a mind-body response, similar to the fight-or-flight response when we experience stress or danger. One important physiological process that temporarily freezes our impulses (e.g. skip the workout and go for happy hour) and focus on our long-term goals (e.g. finishing a triathlon in 3 months) is heart rate variability (HRV). HRV is the beat-to-beat fluctuations in our heart rate and people who had a higher HRV showed greater willpower in a study that require participants to tap

into their willpower by eating carrots and resisting cookies (Segerstrom & Solberg Nes, 2007). One of the best ways to increase our HRV is exercise! It is no wonder why I often hear people tell me they tend to eat healthier when they exercise regularly. Now if only we can muster up enough willpower to make it to our workouts then we're set!

Just like our muscles need fuel to work, willpower also does. Gailliot (2007) argues that the fuel of willpower is glucose. This is not surprising as glucose is the primary fuel source for our brain and willpower is partly a mental act that engages many areas of the brain. The implication here is that if willpower requires glucose, we will likely have a much harder time to flex our willpower when our blood glucose levels are low. This may explain why we tend to make less stellar choices at the grocery store or restaurant when we are hungry and our energy is low. This doesn't give us the excuse to binge on sugary foods every time we feel like we need a boost of willpower. The lesson here is that we should keep our blood glucose levels as steady as possible throughout the day by eating balanced meals and snacks regularly in small portions. Skipping meals or eating huge meals may be our worst enemy when it comes to conserving fuel for flexing our willpower.

The limit of willpower is much like physical fitness. Even the most gifted athletes can suffer burnout and periods of lack luster performance. While physical burnout often happens when we over train, willpower gets depleted when we call on it one too many times. In experiments where people were asked to exercise self-control on one occasion struggled to do so the second time. This seemed to be true no matter what the nature of the temptation is. For example, dragging ourselves out of bed to work at a tedious job during the day may affect our willpower to get to the gym in the evening or turn down the tub of Ben & Jerry's in our freezer late at night. It is therefore important to set priorities and give ourselves a break on the things that don't matter as much. No matter how amazing we are, we can't always be perfect and do it all. This is precisely the reason why most diets don't work

because dieters see it as a constant act of self-control so eventually it becomes too hard and they fall off the wagon simply because no one person has that amount of willpower 24/7, let alone dieting is not the only thing in life that requires self-control.

Aside from actual acts of self-control, social stress can also take a toll on our willpower. Studies have shown that people who feel socially rejected or lonely have less self-control over temptations and persevering through life's challenges (Baumeister et al., 2005). This may explain why people who workout at health clubs and participate in group classes or personal training tend to have a better adherence rate than those who try to do it at home or on their own. The social support we get from our workout partners and instructors may be an important source of strength we need to get us to the gym and challenge ourselves during our workouts.

Knowing what depletes willpower, let's focus on what may help restore it. When we are exhausted and sleep deprived, our mind and body often seek the easy way out. So one obvious solution is adequate and restful sleep. Wells & Cruess (2006) observed that people who only sleep 4 hours a night are less likely to make healthy food choices. If getting enough sleep is crucial, how do we get ourselves through days that we simply couldn't get the recommended 7-8 hours? Some ways to temporarily increase our willpower is by boosting our mood. Anything that makes us laugh (e.g. watching our favorite comedy show or talking to a good friend) or treating ourselves to something special (e.g. getting a massage or listening to our favorite songs) can act as a "booster shot" (McGonigal, 2008) to re-energize us and help us feel in control again.

To increase our overall willpower reserves, it is attainable via training. If you've ever tried to alter your workout regime, such as taking a class you have never taken or hired a personal trainer who took you through a workout you've never done before, your body probably would have screamed "Ouch!" the next day or two. And if you were courageous enough to do it again and again, over time your body would have proudly announced, "Bring it on!" This is simply called adaptation. Our willpower works very similarly. By picking one thing that we are not used to controlling and then try to

do it everyday, we are exercising our willpower and once we get through the initial discomfort, the chosen act will not be much of a struggle anymore. The beauty of this is the additional willpower we now have can be applied to not just the chosen act but to other areas in life that also requires self-control. In other words, the willpower we gain from going to the gym 5 times a week may also give us the willpower we need to take control of our finances.

Finally, let's talk about conserving willpower and maybe bypassing it altogether. If we design our lives thoughtfully, we may not need to put ourselves in as many situations where willpower is called upon. I often give kudos to those of you who make it to my early morning classes every week like clockwork. You're inspiring to me because you don't HAVE to come to my class, you choose to get up when your alarm clock goes off and that's an act of willpower in itself. Whereas for me, the choice has pretty much been made, as I have to show up to teach a class. When there is no choice, no willpower is needed. So think about how you can limit your choices where appropriate so you are not faced with a pantry full of junk food and have to decide whether or not to go to the gym when you are tired and hungry after a stressful day at work. When you have to consult your "temptress" before making a choice, she often wins! Train and flex your willpower smartly and you will go a long way.

## References

- Baumeister, R.F. 2003. Ego depletion and self-regulation failure: A resource model of self-control. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 27(2), 281-84.
- Baumeister, R.F. et al. 2005. Social exclusion impairs self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(4), 589-604.
- Gailliot, M.T. et al. 2007. Self-control relies on glucose as a limited energy source: Willpower is more than a metaphor. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(2), 325-36.
- McGonigal, K. 2008. The Science of Willpower, *IDEA Fitness Journal*, 6, 42-9.
- Segerstrom, S.C. & Solberg Nes, L. 2007. Heart rate variability reflects self-regulatory strength, effort, and fatigue. *Psychological Science*, 18(3), 275-81.
- Wells, T., & Cruess, D.G. 2006. Effects of partial sleep deprivation on food consumption and food choice. *Psychology and Health*, 21, 79-86.