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## Willpower and Healthy Behaviors

Every day, you make decisions to resist impulses in the quest for a healthier, happier life. Whether it's turning down a second helping of mashed potatoes, dragging yourself to the gym, forgoing another round of cocktails or resisting the urge to skip the Monday-morning meeting, your will is tested on a near-constant basis.

Limited willpower is often cited as a primary roadblock to maintaining a healthy weight, and research supports this idea. A study by Eli Tsukayama at the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues found, for example, that children with better self-control were less likely to become overweight as they transitioned to adolescence, thanks to their ability to control impulses and delay gratification.

However, as described previously, resisting those impulses may diminish one's strength to withstand the next temptation. Todd Heatherton, PhD, of Dartmouth College, and Kathleen Vohs demonstrated this in a study in which they offered dieting students ice cream after they'd watched a sad film. Some of the subjects had watched normally, while others were instructed to stifle their emotional reactions, an effort that required willpower. The researchers found that subjects who tapped into their willpower to squelch their feelings ate considerably more ice cream than did those who were free to respond emotionally to the movie.

People often blame bad moods for so-called "emotional eating." But Heatherton and Vohs found that their subjects' emotional states didn't influence how much ice cream they ate. In other words, willpower depletion was more important than mood in determining why the subjects indulged.

The reasons that someone is dieting may also play a role. As the previous section described, Muraven and colleagues found that a person's beliefs and attitudes may buffer them from the effects of depletion. In one example of this idea, he asked volunteers to resist eating from a plate of cookies placed before them. Then he tested their self-control strength by having them squeeze an exercise handgrip for as long as they could. He found that the people who chose not to eat the cookies for internal reasons (such as enjoying the challenge of resisting the treats) showed better self-control in the handgrip test than did people who resisted for external reasons (such as wanting to please the experimenter).



It's clear that willpower is a necessary component of healthy eating. In an environment where unhealthy (and mouthwatering) food choices are everywhere, resisting temptation is likely to deplete willpower, chipping away at the resolve of even highly motivated dieters. Yet overeating behaviors are complex, with numerous psychological and neurological underpinnings. As a result, the role of willpower is somewhat contentious when discussing treatments for obesity.

Some experts believe that stressing self-control and personal choice stigmatizes people — and is unlikely to motivate them to lose weight. Health practitioners should avoid emphasizing willpower in this pursuit, such experts argue, and focus on minimizing the impact of the environment on eating behavior. After all, when it comes to our modern environment, resisting the urge to overeat can be an enormous challenge. We're bombarded with ads for high-calorie treats. Fast, cheap, processed food is readily available 24 hours a day, seven days a week — and often costs less than healthier options. Still, both willpower and the environment play a role in food-related choices. Better understanding of both elements will improve options for individuals and health practitioners wrestling with obesity.

Willpower plays a role in other healthy lifestyle choices as well, including the use and abuse of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs. Developing good self-control as children may prevent substance abuse problems in teenagers and adults, according to Kevin King, PhD, of the University of Washington. King and his colleagues explored self-control in adolescents as they progressed from grades 6 to 11. They found that the adolescents who had more self-control problems in sixth grade — such as talking out of turn in class or acting without thinking — were more likely to use alcohol, tobacco and marijuana as high school juniors.

Unsurprisingly, willpower also appears to be important in curbing alcohol use, as Muraven demonstrated in several studies. In one experiment, he found that social drinkers who exercised self-control in a lab setting went on to drink more alcohol in a supposed “taste test” than subjects who didn't previously dip into their self-control stockpiles. In another study, he found that on days when underage social drinkers found themselves having to exert more self-control

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than usual, they were more likely to violate their own self-imposed drinking limits. This finding provides more evidence that exerting willpower in one sphere can undermine your capacity to resist temptations in other, unrelated areas of life.

Understanding the role of willpower is likely to be important for developing effective treatments for addiction and in helping guide people toward making healthy choices, such as eating well, exercising and avoiding illicit substances. Research on willpower already offers suggestions for sticking with healthy behaviors. Strategies for managing willpower will be discussed later.



### FURTHER READING

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