

# The Guide to Self-Discipline



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In 1972, Walter Mischel brought children one by one into a room and gave them marshmallows. The doors were locked. The windows were unidirectional.

No, Mischel was not a pedophile. He was a psychologist and this would prove to be one of the most famous experiments of the last century.

Each child was put in a room by themselves and given a single treat. He then told the child that he had to leave the room, but if the child waited and didn't eat the marshmallow until he came back, he would reward them with two marshmallows.

While outside the room, he tracked what the children did. Could they delay gratification and wait for a greater reward? Or would they indulge their impulses once left unsupervised?

About a third immediately ate the marshmallow as soon as Mischel walked out. Another third waited for a period of time, but finally gave in and ate it. And then the last third waited the full 15 minutes — no doubt an eternity for a child with candy in front of them — until Mischel came back and gave them their reward.

At the time, psychologists believed self-discipline and will-power was

something that was innate, and unchangeable, so in this case, it was an afterthought. What Mischel had been more interested in was whether a child's age correlated with their ability to delay gratification. It was an experiment in developmental psychology, not personality.

And sure enough, it did correlate: older children were, on average, able to wait longer before giving into temptation. This got published. Mischel went on with his career and the children went on with theirs. The marshmallow experiment was a success, but largely forgotten.

But the Marshmallow Experiment, as it's now known, was almost lost to the annals of minor significance. Chances are I wouldn't be writing about it and you wouldn't be reading about it if it weren't for a coincidence and 20 years of time.

It so happened that the subjects of Mischel's original experiment consisted of his daughter (then five-years-old) and her schoolmates, including many of her friends. As the years dragged on and his daughter and her friends grew up, it became harder and harder for Mischel to ignore the fact that many of the kids who demonstrated no ability to delay gratification were getting in trouble at school and making poor grades, and the ones who had showed a perfect display of delayed gratification were scoring high on their SAT's and getting admitted to prestigious colleges. He decided to track the children down and see where they had ended up as young adults.

The follow-up results were seismic and why the experiment continues to be so famous today.

A child's ability to delay gratification correlated with academic and professional success more than almost any other measure — more than intelligence, more than standardized testing, more than household income, religion, personality tests, gender — anything.

Psychologists conducted similar studies and found that people who were able to delay gratification longer were, on average, physically

healthier, socially more popular, academically more successful, financially more stable, and overall rated their subjective quality of life higher. They produced better SAT scores, went to better schools, got better jobs, had more stable relationships and suffered from fewer mental illnesses.

A definitive predictor of future success eluded psychologists for close to a century. The measurement of IQ had originally been invented for this purpose, but failed spectacularly, and other measurements proved just as faulty. But it appeared Mischel had stumbled upon a reliable predictor on accident.

Do keep in mind these are averages, there are still a lot of factors that determine the quality of one's life. It just appears that self-discipline underlies many of them. In fact, many of the problems I've addressed on this site for years — [overcoming anxiety](#), [the actions required for happiness](#), [success with women](#), to name a few — research shows a correlation in people who have higher degrees of discipline and will power with successfully handling these.

I would also venture to guess that our current generation lacks self-discipline more than almost any generation before us. Will power was celebrated as a virtue throughout the Victorian era and prior. And for most of human history anyone who lacked a modicum of daily discipline would merely starve to death.

Today we are swamped with distractive forces — television, movies, social media, internet, video games, texting — and most of us have been raised by parents with a “hands off” child-rearing philosophy, you know, assuming they were around at all.

For our generation, (unless you're Asian) emphasis has always been put on self-esteem and not self-discipline.

Instead of engaged and nurtured, we were placed squarely in front of new nannies: cable television or a Playstation. Instead of being

punished for half-assing, we were rewarded for mediocrity. Participation awards, “A for Effort” and trophies for everyone, even if they lost — these reinforced the belief that we don’t actually have to earn anything, it’s handed to us.

Without veering too far off into a sociological diatribe about how the (post-)modern generations have really fucked themselves up, let me distill it thusly: we’re a generation that while rewarded with the greatest abundance of opportunity and technology in history, we were never forced to earn what we got, and therefore developed little self-control.

This lack of self-control is bleeding over into our personal and emotional lives. And suddenly one can see how our generation currently reports all-time highs in anxiety disorders, depression and relationship trouble, statistics the extra medications fail to erode away.

When I surveyed you, my lovely readers, earlier this year, about what you felt your biggest weakness was, self-discipline was a common, but not top, answer given.

But on a second glancing through that list, and after the research I’ve done on self-regulation (the fancy psychological term for will power) lately, it appears most of the top answers ARE symptoms of a lack of self-discipline — being assertive, standing up for oneself, career advancement, life balance, time management — and these would all be greatly remedied by a newfound discipline for ourselves, and the removal of that onerous space between wanting and doing.

But before we dive into how to build self-discipline, I want to establish a couple definitions. I realize these definitions are arbitrary and don’t reflect psychological doctrine perfectly, but I want to make a couple distinctions which I believe will be useful for our purposes.

1. **Will Power** – The ability to perform an action despite a negative emotional state. Or to put it in layman’s terms: your ability to do

something when you don't want to do it. Will power describes the short-term burst against internal resistance, that in-the-moment perseverance we've all resorted to at one point or another.

2. **Self-Discipline** – How close your day-to-day behavior reflects the person you wish to be. This is a longer-term fidelity to how you envision your ideal self. Self-discipline, beyond simply persevering in the moment, represents a daily self-directness in all of your actions.

I split these two definitions up because I think most people trip themselves up by confusing them. Will power requires momentary psychic strength. Self-discipline requires days, weeks or months of daily habit and conscious control.

What we'll discover is that the more will power you exert in the short term, the more you can fatigue your self-discipline in the long-term. So in many ways, ENHANCING your short-term will power will actually backfire on your long-term discipline depending on how you go about it.

What I mean by that is, if you put all of your effort into short-term perseverance, you are often LESS likely to develop a life-long control of a certain behavior.

Anyone who's ever attempted a diet can probably tell you this.

## Will Power Must Be Practiced

In 1994, psychologist Roy Baumeister made a startling discovery. People who were forced to exert will power (in this case, resisting eating cookies placed in



front of them) did worse on puzzles and problem solving tasks than people who indulged themselves. Thinking that perhaps it was a fluke of particularly hungry people, him and other psychologists ended up reproducing the results over and over again — people who are forced to exert will power and focus on one task, are worse at exerting will power and focus on subsequent tasks.

What this means is **our will power is finite and can be drained.**

We each have a certain fuel tank of will power that we can exert and once we use it all up, we are far more prone to give up and indulge ourselves in our whims, impulses and base desires.

This phenomenon is referred to in psychology as [ego depletion](#).

Hence why after a hard day's work, all you want to do is sloth around on the couch and eat ice cream. Or why after a week of strict dieting it's so easy to convince yourself that eating an entire pizza isn't such a big deal. Or why after studying all day for an exam you feel justified in going out and getting shit-faced on tequila and exposing yourself in public (...not that this has ever happened, just saying).

This information depresses people. They figure, well, if I only have so much will power, then I may as well conserve it for really important tasks, like practicing trick jumps in Halo 3 or not smacking my boss in the face tomorrow when he yells at me.

They figure there's no point in trying to get that six-pack or start that new business if they barely have enough will power to make it through their current day-to-day drudgery.

But the good news is will power is like a muscle, it can be exercised and practiced and built up. It can also be forgotten, weakened and atrophied. Just like going to the gym and building up your body, you can build up your discipline and will power over a long period of time by setting and accomplishing series of tasks on a consistent basis.

You can make your fuel tank bigger and bigger by draining it on a consistent basis.

And you can also slow the loss of will power. Studies show that putting yourself into a positive and/or competitive mood has restorative effects on will power, as does, strangely enough, glycogen (as in eating sugar or starch).

This is why those catastrophic tasks as an adolescent (homework, flossing) become simple and an afterthought once you're older. You've built up your ego depletion; your will power muscle is bigger and stronger. You also, ideally, give more of a crap about yourself and your well-being, so you're happy, excited even, to do these things.

It's also why some people are able to focus and work 12- or 16-hour days, while others struggle to pour themselves coffee. It's not that they're superhuman or genetically enhanced or neurotic, but they've built up their fuel tank to that level. They've practiced will power to such an extent over such a long period of time, blowing through a 12-hour day of productivity becomes the new normal.

This is probably the biggest argument for studying consistently in university. For many of us, we're able to loaf through college by staying up all night a couple days before the exam or term paper while screwing around for weeks on end. That's how I was, and in some ways I regret it.

But at some point in your life, you will likely run into a situation where you wish you were capable of working one of these marathon sessions without breaking a sweat; or you'll wish to be able to work a series of marathon sessions when necessary — starting your own business, working for a major promotion, sales pitch to investors, etc.

But to get back to the point: will power is finite, but it can be built and practiced. It's what happens in the long-term that gets more

complicated.

## **Self-Discipline is a Series of Positive Habits**

Let's stick with the diet example since that's something most people have failed at at one point or another.

Most people go about dieting with a “crash” mentality. They pick an arbitrary number — say, lose 15 pounds in two months — and then they implement whichever form of starvation or aestheticism most appeals to them that season.

Most people approach the whole ordeal from a perspective of will power. I will turn down desserts. I will skip breakfast. I will force myself to walk three times a week for 30 minutes. Then I'll lose my 15 pounds and I'll be happy.

Even if their ego depletion survives such a crass assault from their vanity, they've now depleted all of their will power in order to reach an arbitrary goal, and not build a lifestyle habit.

What happens? By and large people fail. They don't make it. Eventually their ego depletion catches up with them, and the Oreos, Snickers, Pizza Hut, and 2-for-1 margaritas take over.

And even for the few who succeed, their fate is not much better. Statistics show that over 90% of people who reach their dieting goals eventually gain all of the weight back, and usually add some more, just to be safe.

If you peruse fitness and nutrition magazines and forums, anyone who has successfully lost a lot of weight (or added a lot of muscle) and maintained it will tell you that it's not about will power but it's rather about integrating the appropriate habits into your daily life. It's not about the will power to give up certain foods, but developing the taste for good ones. It's not about forcing yourself to the gym every week as



much as finding a way to actually look forward to it and enjoy it.

This subject is a little bit close to my heart since I lost between 30 and 35 pounds over the course of a year between 2009 and 2010.

What ultimately worked for me and most people was not a diet plan or following a specific regimen to the ‘T’, but building a series of healthy life habits. Your will power is exerted to making simple lifestyle changes that are sustainable rather than drastic shifts that you have no hope of maintaining day after day, year after year.

**Most people exert their will power on temporary fixes rather than life-long habits.**

Think about it, a person who gets up every morning, makes their bed, gets all of their work done by noon, practices an instrument in the afternoon, learns a new language in their spare time, goes to the gym every other night, and budgets their finances perfectly, calls their mother and feeds the dog — do you really think they are forcing themselves into making all of these decisions at every moment of every day against a wave of internal resistance?

Of course not, they would deplete their fuel tank in no time. And even if they worked up their will power over a long period of time, they’d burn themselves out within a few days.

This is why research has shown over and over again that people who set multiple goals at the same time end up accomplishing none of them — they burn themselves out before they have time to turn each one into a habit. What DOES work is focusing on one goal at a time, and building up to it slowly over a long period of time by implementing habits.

This is not sexy or exciting. This is probably why few people bother doing it. We’re impatient. We’re undisciplined.

So how does one exert their will power toward healthy habits? Here's how — and for what it's worth, I didn't magically come up with this. This little four-step process is based on the research of Baumeister and others, some NLP principles, and then a few of my own touches thrown in based on my years of experience working with people :

1. **Clearly define your goal** – Goals should be quantifiable and measurable. For instance, “look sexy in my new shirt” is not quantifiable or measurable (if you don't believe me, drink a few beers and then tell me how you look). Instead, “lose 10 pounds” or “get down to 12% body fat” is distinct and measurable. But this is a goal that can be achieved without nailing a lifestyle habit. So instead, look at what will create the proper habit and make THAT your goal. So instead of looking sexy in your shirt, or getting to 12% body fat, make your goal, “never eat more than 3,000 calories a day and keep my fat intake below 100g.” Measurable. Quantifiable. And allows lifestyle flexibility to create a lasting habit.
2. **Monitor your behavior** – Possibly the most important and most overlooked step. Most of us are woefully unaware of what we actually spend our time thinking and doing. In one study, researchers found that people who kept a diet log and tracked everything they ate each day lost 50% more weight than people who didn't. Keep a journal, track your time, keep lists of what you accomplished. If your goal has to be measurable, then what you do each day should be measurable as well. Otherwise you have no idea how close you're getting.
3. **Create incentive and accountability** – Just as will power replenishes in competitive situations, you up your chances of achieving a goal by finding ways to give yourself incentive or keep yourself accountable. This could be something as simple as telling friends and family, to putting money down on your ability to achieve your goal. Websites such as [www.stickk.com](http://www.stickk.com) where you're able to bet money against yourself and others of whether you'll meet your goal or not are becoming a raging success.

4. **Get excited** – Everything is easier when you enjoy it and when you're excited about it. If something is not fun, find a way to make it fun. Get creative. Turn it into a game. Hate eating vegetables? Challenge yourself to see how many calories you can get from vegetables each day. Then reward yourself. Set personal records. If you hate the gym, play a sport. Set affirmations for yourself. Remind yourself why you're doing what you're doing. Every time you screw something up or someone doubts you, get pissed off and use it as fuel to inspire future success. Instead of getting weighed down by your emotions, leverage them to your advantage.

Author Jonathan Franzen once said that nothing good could be written on a laptop that had an internet connection. Your goal should not be the final end product, but creating circumstances which make the end product inevitable.

Instead of setting a goal of getting 3-hours of work done each night, expend your will power on habits which will make that 3-hours inevitable – removing distractions, disconnecting internet, setting up rituals.

New behaviors only require will power until they're ingrained in us, until we no longer have to think about them. Instead of asking yourself what goal you'd like to reach, go one step further and ask which habits you'd have to implement in order for that goal to be achievable, and then expend the will power on implementing those life habits.

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