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'Self-talk' can help self-control, researchers find

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If you can't stop from devouring a bowl of chips at a party, you might consider talking to yourself.

A new study from the University of Toronto Scarborough, published in this month's *Acta Psychologica*, shows a connection between inner dialogue and the ability to control impulsive behaviour.

"Telling yourself, 'Stick to that diet, stick to that diet' . . . that kind of self-talk actually contributes to self-control," said Michael Inzlicht, who supervised the study. "When we don't have the ability to engage in this kind of self-talk, we have less ability to control ourselves."

That's why, when those chips appear in front of us while we're engaged in conversation, we may find our mouths full before we realize we're eating. It's not a new idea but the authors say it's the first time a study has shown that self-control relies on verbal expression, whether out loud or inside one's own mind.

"People had linked language and the shape of your thoughts," Inzlicht said. "This takes it a step further and says language also affects your ability to control yourself."

The study's 37 participants were given a classic "go/no go" self-control task, explained lead author Alexa Tullett, who is working on her PhD in social psychology.

Sitting in front of a computer screen, they pressed one button when a yellow box appeared ("go") and another when a blue box popped up ("no go"). The yellow box appeared more often so participants felt a natural impulse to hit the "go" button.

While carrying out that task, some participants were told to draw circles with their other hand, allowing them to talk themselves through the task. Other participants were told to repeat the word "computer" aloud, so could not carry on an inner dialogue.

The second group was less able to control their impulses, hitting the "go" button when they should have been hitting the "no go" button.

Inzlicht said if people are aware of the connection between self-talk and self-control, they will be better equipped to fight off a moment of weakness.

"Knowledge is power," he said.

Meanwhile, researchers at Queen's University in Kingston have made their own discovery about impulsivity.

Led by neuroscience PhD student Scott Hayton, the study compared the brains of rats that had learned impulse control with those that had not. The researchers found electrical signals between brain cells in the frontal lobe were stronger in the rats with self-control.

The finding could be useful in the diagnosis and treatment of people with disorders associated with impulsivity, like ADHD or gambling.

"It gives us something we know should be there when people have learned (self-control)," Hayton said, explaining that the disorders could be caused by a defect in this part of the brain. "It gives us something to look for in these individuals."