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Is Self-Control A Limited Resource, or Driven By Motivation and Attention?

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Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on September 13, 2012

New research disputes the belief that self-control is a limited resource — a behavior that can literally be used up at times.

In the new study, researchers Michael Inzlicht and Brandon Schmeichel argue that the prevailing model of self-control as an emotional bank account may not be as accurate as researchers once thought. The researchers believe that self-control is not a limited resource, but is actually a process driven by motivation and attention.

Self-control or self-discipline is essential daily life. Extreme failures of self-control may lead to incarceration, bankruptcy, or becoming overweight or obese.

The resource model of self-control has been widely accepted with over 100 papers supporting it. Conceived as a limited resource, if we exercise a lot of self-control by refusing a second slice of cake, we may not have enough self-control later in the day to resist the urge to shop or watch TV.

But Inzlicht and Schmeichel point out that a newer crop of studies are yielding results that don't fit with this idea of self-control.

Recent studies have shown that incentives, individual perceptions of task difficulty, personal beliefs about willpower, feedback on task performance, and changes in mood all seem to influence the ability to exercise self-control.

The researchers propose an alternative model that describes self-control as a process involving motivation and attention.

"Engaging in self-control by definition, is hard work; it involves deliberation, attention, and vigilance," the authors write. Resisting that second slice of cake may involve a shift in motivation such that we feel justified in indulging ourselves later on.

It's not necessarily the case that we can't control ourselves because we're "out" of self-control but rather that we choose not to control ourselves any longer.

At the same time, our attention shifts so that we're less likely to notice cues that signal the need for self-control (cake = empty calories) and we pay more attention to cues that signal some kind of reward (cake = delicious treat).

The researchers hope the suggestion of a new model will stimulate other researchers to ask critical questions about how self-control really works.

"The idea that self-control is a resource is one possibility, but there are alternative possibilities that can accommodate more of the accumulated data," Inzlicht says.

Everyone agrees that a better understanding and identification of the mechanisms that underlie self-control is integral to helping society cope with a wide range of issues and behaviors, including obesity, impulsive spending, gambling and drug abuse.

Inzlicht and Schmeichel hope that researchers will ultimately be able to use this knowledge to design effective methods for improving self-control.

Their research is published in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Source: [Association for Psychological Science](#)

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APA Reference

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