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Self-control is within our reach, even when we're tired: scientists

By Carmen Chai
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A young girl takes part in a cake eating contest during the Fourth of July festivities at the Baumholder U.S. military base on July 4, 2012 in Baumholder, Germany.

Ralph Orlowski/Getty Images

TORONTO – It's 7 p.m., you're tired, just finished work and couldn't get a seat on the bus ride home. You can either eat an entire pizza while watching *Game of Thrones* or you can head to the gym to work out. What's your choice?

As the day wanes on, it may be harder to stick to our goals – exercising more, eating healthier, quitting smoking, saving money – but a new University of Toronto study suggests that when we blame our mess ups on being tired, we're just making

excuses.

No matter how exhausted, time-strapped or desperate we may feel, ultimately, self-control is still in our hands, social psychologist Dr. Michael Inzlicht says in a new study.

“It’s true that you show less self-control at the end of the day. It’s not that you can’t control yourself, it’s more that you don’t feel like controlling yourself anymore,” Inzlicht told Global News.

“It’s more like a shift in motivational priorities that occurs over the course of a day or a year,” he said.

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Inzlicht calls self-control a social construct that infiltrates every aspect of our lives: finances, health, relationships, our social networks and our professional worlds. It helps us keep our cool when we’re angry, it makes us commit to some quality time with the treadmill or it leaves us with window shopping without ever swiping our credit cards.

Other theories suggest that self-constraint is like a muscle – the more you abstain from drinking, the longer you go without eating cake, or keeping up those daily trips to the gym, the easier it is to maintain those habits.

Like a muscle, the more you put your willpower to the test, the stronger it gets.

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“The theory is exactly that: it allows you to stay on task, to avoid temptations, to do the things you want to be doing. The more you use this resource, it’s less likely you’ll ditch doing things when you’re tired or fatigued,” Inzlicht said. But it has limitations: this dominant view says that self-control is like energy, and when it runs low, we’re left powerless.

But Inzlicht doesn’t believe this is the case. Instead, the Toronto researcher collaborated with scientists in Texas and Scotland to think through their own theory.

He said that research points to people faltering after a period of time and it has less to do with self-control and more to do with a shift in our desires. Inzlicht’s team thinks it comes out of evolution.

“We need to balance desires for exploitation with desires for exploration,” he explained. We are curious, pleasure-seeking beings, after all.

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Take a squirrel, for example. Every day, it heads to the same tree to forage for nuts – this is survival. It knows that tree is packed with future meals but after enough gathering, the squirrel wants to explore other trees. They might have good options as well. And they might even have better nuts, Inzlicht said.

“Yes, we want to work and it’s rewarded by money or esteem but after a while our desire for labour decreases and we start to desire leisure, a mental break. We want to balance work and cognitive play and that leads to changes in attention, emotion and contemplating other goals,” Inzlicht said.

“When we’re refreshed and feel good, we have energy we can pour into other goals.”

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So, aside from squirrels, what does this mean for everyday humans, especially as we try to manage our New Year goals?

Inzlicht suggests that we have a few tactics to turn to. For starters, we need to steer clear of temptations, especially when our energy levels are low.

But his main advice is to change the way we relate to our goals. Instead of “have-tos,” we should be phrasing goals as “want-tos” – that means we don’t “have to” go to the gym, we “want to” be ready for the beach by June. We also don’t “have to” stop shopping, we “want to” buy a house by next year.


“If someone wants to eat healthier, they should think of the enjoyment that they can get from eating delicious, yet healthy foods. In contrast, they should probably not frame their eating goal as something they feel obliged to do...the key is finding a way to want and like the goal that you are chasing,” he said.

Goal-chasers also need to take mental breaks and refresh. Inzlicht says, yes, that means stepping away from your work space for a breather or even taking a vacation. They don’t hurt productivity, they actually might boost it, Inzlicht promised.

Inzlicht’s findings were published Wednesday in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

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