SELF-CONTROL? SURE, IF IT’S A PLEASURE

After a long day, you may be tempted to give in to the urge—grab an unhealthy snack and avoid tackling obligatory tasks. But you don’t have to.

While people have a harder time controlling themselves when tired, it doesn’t mean they’ve exhausted all of their willpower. The key to boosting self-control is finding pleasure in the necessary activities of life.

“When people are fatigued they experience a change in motivational priorities,” says psychologist Michael Inzlicht. “They are less willing to work for the things they feel obliged to do and more willing to work for things they like to do.”

Inzlicht, an associate professor at UTSC and affiliate faculty member at U of T’s School of Public Policy and Governance, says the important thing is to convert tasks from “have-to’s” into “want-to’s.”

The prevailing view in psychology, he explains, has been that repeated acts of restraint exhaust supply, until people are left with little or no willpower. But Inzlicht says this results from a shift in priorities—not an absence of self-control. In fact, changing “have-to’s” to “want-to’s” might allow you to make the most of that time when your energy and focus seem to be depleted.

When that fails, it’s worth planning for the unavoidable ups and downs in motivation by steering clear of temptations and taking mental breaks in order to refresh.

For individuals with busy personal and professional lives, this may be easier said than done. But it’s not impossible. “The key is finding a way to want and like the goal you are chasing.”