

INSIGHTS

TAKE CONTROL

Make peace with the impulses we all share. >>>



The Edge of Restraint

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO BOOST SELF-CONTROL. WHY THEY WORK IS A SUBJECT OF BURNING DEBATE.

A STUDENT ZONES out during an evening lecture. A babysitter loses composure after enduring one tantrum too many. An over-worked bartender would rather mingle than make another cocktail. All would likely agree, as many scientists have, that our readiness to control our impulses and direct our behavior wanes when we do so repeatedly. The more contentious question is: Why?

Self-control may behave like a muscle. That's the metaphor psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues have long used to illustrate their idea that when we exercise self-control, we're burning a limited resource. Doing something that requires willpower, like taking a test or resisting a cigarette, wears down our capacity for self-control, they say, so we automatically try to preserve it for important moments by using less of it.

Other researchers, though, dispute the very idea that our self-control has limits. "It's not about capacity; it's about choices you make and the motives you have," says psychologist Michael Inzlicht of the University of Toronto. "Motivation can be switched on a dime." He proposes that as a product of evolution, our intentions pivot between what we feel we *should do*—like press on with a difficult task that promises an eventual payoff—and what we naturally *want to do*, like sleep, eat, mate, or pursue whatever intrigues us.

A complete explanation of willpower remains elusive. Meanwhile, evidence that the basic thinking exercises described here can strengthen our self-control—together with the experiments detailed in the following pages—demonstrates how complex this inclination really is. —Matt Huston

Prayer and mindfulness meditation, research suggests, can induce practitioners (believers and nonbelievers alike) to better control their thinking and attention after engaging in a mentally taxing activity, such as suppressing an emotion.

Focusing on the importance of a closely held personal value—such as creativity or friendship—when your self-control is tested may support persistence and the delay of gratification, studies have found.

Envisioning someone who is like you persevering may help you do the same. After a self-control trial, students who placed themselves in the shoes of a fictional, "recharged" student seemed to perform better on a follow-up test as a result.