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Ways you can develop this vital mental muscle

1. Keep your blood sugar level steady by eating regular, healthy meals. Studies show your willpower is lowered when your blood sugar levels fall. Getting enough sleep has also been identified as vital, as tiredness depletes willpower.
2. Remember you have a finite amount of willpower. If you use it up in one area, you may not have enough for another area. So plan your day ahead. What matters most? What goals and skills will be most important? Focus on those things.
3. You can strengthen your willpower through practice. Studies show that the exercises you choose don't even have to relate to a big goal you have. You can select a small, regular task that you don't particularly enjoy and commit to doing it for one month. For instance, you could lift hand weights while you watch television, or make yourself sit up straight when you're at your desk. The point is to regularly exercise self-control.
4. Increase your ability to rise to the challenge of new behaviours by deliberately changing a few routines now and again. You could go to work by a different route, or brush your teeth using your non-dominant hand.
5. Take every opportunity to rehearse new skills in settings where less is at stake. This helps you to shift a new skill towards becoming a habit. For example, practise better listening in your regular team meetings before trying this out in an interaction with an important client.

WILLPOWER: A SECRET OF SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE

Focus and sustained effort underpin success

Every year, the American Psychological Association asks people about their ability to make the professional and personal changes they need in order to reach their goals. Survey participants regularly cite "lack of willpower" as the biggest obstacle preventing them from following through. It's the same at the level of teams and organisations. There's rarely a shortage of good ideas about what needs to happen. But implementation is where people usually come unstuck! All too often, this is the weak point for both teams and individuals. Without focus and sustained effort, even a great plan will fail.

Discipline, focus, willpower, self-control – it doesn't matter what you call it – this is the attribute that researchers have shown is the secret behind all kinds of success. It's been called the most coveted human virtue. To inspire you to read on, here are just a few of the many research findings on the benefits of willpower: greater career success; greater financial security; better self-esteem; improved physical and mental health; higher levels of satisfaction and well-being. Interested?

Make This Your Best Year!

In our goal setting program ('Make This Your Best Year!'), participants learn how to focus their strengths and direct their lives towards the things that are deeply important to them, professionally and personally. This includes learning more about the new science of willpower. What did they make of this? Overwhelmingly, participants comment on their increased sense of focus and ability to set goals that (this time!) they know how to follow through. "I've now got the motivation and tools to achieve my goals," commented a CEO who attended.

Willpower is a finite resource

The challenge is that when you want to do things differently, your new skills are not yet automatic. Effort and attention are required while you practice them, until they become positive, new habits. No wonder people report feeling tired after just a few hours of effort. Recent neuroscience findings have shown that, behaving in ways that are new and different for you, places great demands on your reserves of self-control and willpower. Willpower turns out to be a finite resource that you need to budget carefully over the course of a day.

As you run out of this limited asset, you begin to suffer from what is termed 'ego depletion': you can't manage to do things that require a lot of effort. In this depleted state, your brain actually functions differently. There are significant changes in the circuitry, including a slowdown in the area of your brain that's crucial for supporting reasoned choices – such as implementing something new.

You struggle to accomplish tasks that you would otherwise be able to manage. Your ability to regulate your thoughts, feelings and behaviour diminishes. You find yourself more sensitive to frustration and irritation whereas, in a less depleted state, your tolerance levels might be much higher. No wonder it feels easier to go back to your old way of operating!

The Radish Experiment and what it shows us

One of the global front-runners in the neuroscience of willpower is Roy Baumeister. In a famous study simply known as the Radish Experiment, he brought subjects into his lab. They had been instructed to fast ahead of coming. His assistants had baked fresh chocolate chip cookies and the irresistible aroma wafted through the room. The subjects were invited to sit down at a table where there were plates of the delicious cookies and also a bowl of raw radishes. Some people were told to eat whatever they wanted. But others were told they could eat only the radishes.

The research team watched through a small, hidden window. Those in the 'radish condition' were observed gazing longingly at the cookies but, with great reluctance, they selected a radish and bit into it. In one way or another, the subjects clearly demonstrated that they were tempted to eat the cookies but, exerting considerable self-control, they did not. They summoned up their willpower and resisted.

But just when the subjects thought that was it, they were led into another room and given a puzzle to solve. They assumed their intelligence was being tested. In fact, the puzzles were all impossible and Baumeister wanted to see how long people would persevere before giving up. Perseverance is known to be a reliable indicator of self-control and willpower.

The subjects who had been able to eat what they liked typically worked on the puzzles for around 20 minutes. But the poor subjects, who had been tempted by the cookies, lasted just eight minutes with the puzzles before giving up! They'd successfully resisted the cookies earlier, but now they'd run out of the willpower to persevere.

Harnessing self-control in the pursuit of your objectives

Willpower turns out to be like a muscle that gets fatigued when demands are made of it. Even quite straightforward new behaviours can require considerable focus and effort until they become automatic. But there's good news too! You can strengthen your willpower. It's a muscle that can be developed by targeted exercises. At the side, you'll find practical suggestions to help you and your team stay on track, despite the challenge of change. Greater willpower is so strongly correlated with positive life outcomes that we believe it's a mental muscle you'll want to develop!