

**Goals**

Intervention



n/a



Client



Yes

Increasing Self-Control through Repeated Practice

Self-control is described as the exertion of control over the self by the self. According to Muraven and Baumeister (2000), self-control is like a muscle, in that it becomes tired the more one uses it. For example, one's capacity to resist the urge to eat a cookie may be strong at first, but then throughout the afternoon, as he or she continues to resist the urge, willpower decreases, much like a muscle that tires with continued use. Self-control is what people use to restrain their desires and impulses. Another way to think about this concept is the idea that willpower is limited. Energy gets used up when you exert self-control so that when another demand for self-control comes along after that, you have less energy available to meet this challenge with (i.e., less able to resist the piece of chocolate).

Research has examined how and when people use self-control in daily life. One study found that people resist two out of every five desires on any given day (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999). This means one spends much of the average day trying to control one's wants and needs. This resistance is often successful. With no resistance, people acted upon 70% of their desires, while with resistance, this rate dropped to only 17%. Further, the findings indicated that people are in a state of desire for 8 hours per day, of which we spend 3 to 4 hours per day resisting those desires and 30 minutes giving in to them (a.k.a. "the naughty half-hour").

It is suggested that most self-control occurs in one of four contexts: regulating thoughts, such as trying to concentrate or shut out an annoying noise; regulating emotions and mood, such as when trying to feel better; regulating impulses, such as resisting temptation; and regulating performance, such as persevering despite a discouraging setback.

Encouragingly, just as we can strengthen our muscles through repeated exercise, we can strengthen our willpower with regular engagement in self-control activities. Research has shown that engaging in some self-control activities regularly for two weeks can lead to a greater general capacity for self-control (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999).



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



Goal

The goal of this tool is to help people initiate small acts of self-control in daily life to strengthen their willpower capacity.



Advice

- The goal of the exercise is to help your client override habitual ways of doing things and practice exerting deliberate control over his or her actions so that, over time, that practice improves self-control. Therefore, the type of self-control activities undertaken is not important; what is important is that the client engages in them. Therefore, help your client come up with realistic and achievable activities.
- Guide your client to start with small acts of self-control and work up from there. The repeated success of small acts of self-control will build momentum and self-efficacy, which will increase your client's chance of succeeding at bigger, more significant acts of self-control.



References

- Baumeister, R. (2014, August 18). Willpower and how to make it work for you [Online video clip]. Ted Ed. <https://ed.ted.com/on/zeX2vGg8>
- Muraven, M., Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1999). Longitudinal improvement of self-regulation through practice: Building self-control strength through repeated exercise. *The Journal of social psychology*, 139(4), 446-457.
- Muraven, M., & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). Self-regulation and depletion of limited resources: Does self-control resemble a muscle? *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(2), 247.



Increasing Self-Control through Repeated Practice

Instructions

We all have something over which we wish we could exert a little more self-control, whether it is resisting unhealthy food, exercising regularly, spending quality time with loved ones, or saving our money. This exercise involves setting up a daily act of self-control so that you can begin to build and strengthen your self-control muscle. The idea is to engage in this self-control activity every day for the next two weeks. Practicing self-control in this way will, over time, improve your ability to use self-control when and where you need it most.

Step 1: Choose a daily act of self-control

Now, choose an act of self-control that you can complete daily. Choose something small and manageable for now, keeping in mind that the act itself does not need to be related to anything in particular. The simple act of exerting self-control daily is the important thing here. Some examples of self-control activities include:

- Controlling your impulse to jump into a conversation with your two cents
- Controlling your impulse to give advice
- Using your unpreferred hand to brush your teeth
- Making your bed every day
- Adjusting and maintaining a good posture
- Allocating time for checking emails
- Controlling your urge to check social media
- Controlling your urge to check a text as soon as it comes through

Step 2: Determine the who, what, where, and when

With regards to your chosen self-control activity (step 1), discuss the following:

- Where will you complete it?
- What time of day will you complete it?
- Will anyone else be involved? If so, who?
- How will you complete the activity?



Step 3: Keep a record of your daily acts of self-control

My daily act of self-control is:

Use the following table to log your daily acts of self-control. Place a checkmark or an x to indicate whether you completed the act, and then rate the level of self-control needed to complete it on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = very little effort required; 10 = a great deal of effort required).

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10
Week 2	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10	/ 10