

Less becomes more

How to strengthen your willpower and increase achievement

Choices. What we say “yes” and “no” to determines the trajectories of our lives.

The path to success is sprinkled with opportunities as well as distractions and temptations. Some paths offer us an opportunity for quicker advancement toward our end goal. Others represent tests to strengthen our fortitude and resiliency. Others may present a life lesson needed to advance our soul (you’ve heard that quote from the Masters Golf tournament – “It’s the journey not the destination that matters.” Although I’m not sure that I fully buy into that notion.).

Willpower has traditionally been characterized as an emotion – make a decision and then just do it! Falling short meant that there were weaknesses or flaws in your character. However, researchers are finding that there is more to the story. That in fact, there is a physiological component that influences success.

It seems that there is an intimate relationship between self-control and blood glucose levels. Studies show that glucose dramatically impacts the brain’s ability to focus and remain disciplined, especially when faced with appealing options.

In one particular study, Florida State University’s Dr. Roy Baumeister asked participants to watch a video and suppress any type of facial reactions, including smiling. After the viewing, blood glucose levels among those who exerted self-control dropped dramatically while those who expressed themselves remained the same.

Immediately following that study, participants were then given a concentration test. They were asked to identify the color of displayed words. For instance, the word “red” might appear in green ink. Participants who had previously stifled their responses

scored terribly on the test suggesting that their self-control had already been depleted by the previous viewing challenge. However, when their glucose levels were restored, self-control returned to normal levels.

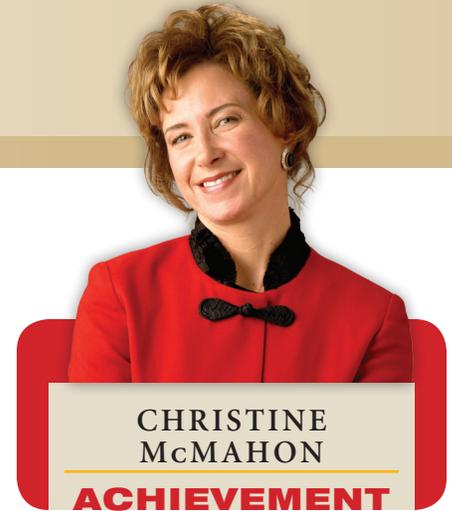
Willpower has its limitations. Especially when not properly supported. A 2007 study of 3,000 people by British psychologist Richard Wiseman shows that 88 percent of all New Year’s resolutions end in failure. According to Wiseman, “Bad habits are hard to break – and in fact, are impossible if you try to break them all at once.”

Why?

Located just behind the forehead is the pre-frontal cortex, the brain area largely responsible for willpower. It is responsible for the orchestration of thoughts and actions relating to internal goals and executive function. Executive function is the ability to differentiate among conflicting thoughts, determine good and bad, better and best, same and different, future consequences of current activities, working toward a defined goal and prediction of outcomes.

The problem with the pre-frontal cortex is that it doesn’t have significant bandwidth. When we assign it our New Year’s resolutions list, for example, it often becomes overwhelmed, resulting in failure to follow through.

Baba Shiv, associate professor of marketing at Stanford University, conducted studies that support Wiseman’s findings. In one study, Shiv divided several dozen undergraduates into two groups. One group was given a two-digit number to remember while the second group received a seven-digit number. Students were told to walk down the hall and choose between two different snack options, a slice of chocolate cake or a bowl of fruit.



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The results were remarkable. The students with seven digits to remember were twice as likely to choose cake as the students given only two digits. Professor Shiv determined that the extra numbers “took up valuable space in the brain, thus creating a cognitive load,” which made it more difficult to resist the tempting dessert.

Until recently, the general consensus had been that willpower was simply about self-discipline and self-control. However, the biological implications of these findings suggest that the brain isn’t built for this type of mandate. Rather, it’s built to handle a very small number of things very well.

By converging our innate powers—brainpower and willpower – we create a strategic force enabling us to achieve big outcomes.

When you think about the amount of time required to realize our New Year’s resolutions, it’s easy to see how we can become disheartened, discouraged and even detour down a different road.

For example, to reasonably lose 30 pounds – that pound per year you’ve packed on since graduating college – with a target of dropping two pounds per week, you will need to diet steadily for about five months. During that time period it’s likely that you will be burdened with additional responsibility, become distracted, frustrated or just plain bored.

What Dr. Baumeister found is that, “Energy from food is needed to sustain the willpower necessary to succeed on a diet.” People who eat smaller meals throughout the day versus skipping meals have typically posted greater overall weight loss because the brain has the necessary energy (glucose) to maintain willpower.

Willpower is the link between your present behavior and your long-term goals. It is responsible for leading the way and adapting to course corrections when faced with temptations or hurdles.

The most effective way to achieve your resolution(s) is to simply narrow your active “to accomplish” list to an item or two. By focusing on fewer goals, your willpower assumes “command” position, over-riding temptations and bad habits, which dramatically increases the likelihood that you will reach your destination. Once those goals are achieved, move on to the next one or two goals on your list.

This truly is an example of how less becomes more. ■

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