

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Up the Horsepower of Your Willpower

Since there's probably *something* that most of us are working on changing, at least sporadically, when we get a new surge of motivation, perhaps it's time to mine the research* that's been coming out about willpower and self-control to see how it might boost our change efforts.

Apparently, the old view that certain virtuous people have amazing willpower to make themselves lose weight, stop swearing, be nice to their in-laws, maintain polite customer service when faced with 4,000 buttheads, or finish a dissertation or two all at the same time, while the rest of us schmucks just have wimpy character because we can only sustain these efforts for a little while before getting pulled away by our negative impulses—apparently that view is only a little true, hardly at all, really.

Turns out that willpower—the capacity to make ourselves do what we do *not* want to do at the moment in hopes of attaining a future goal—is more like a muscle:

1. **It's got a limited amount of energy.** Then it's just done. Like when we've done one too many bicep curls and we just can't do another one. It's not a bottomless character trait some have and some don't. Exerting lots of willpower for a long time fatigues *anyone's* mind and body. It's *very* energy-intensive.
2. **It's not divided.** When we tire our biceps at the gym, they're gonna be tired picking up our toddler, too. If we've resisted telling Aunt Matilda exactly what we think of her for the entire Thanksgiving weekend, it's gonna be *much* harder to resist eating 15 lemon bars. The energy all comes from the same "pool."
3. **It largely runs on glucose** (sugar), which is why raiding the fridge for cookies in the middle of writing a paper allows us to churn out a few more paragraphs when we thought we couldn't write one...more...word.
4. **It can be temporarily enhanced by fear**, the fight or flight response that shuts down distractions and focuses us on the task at hand. So thoughts like, "If I don't finish this Halloween costume in time, my son will be in therapy in a few years, crying about what a horrible a parent I was," can enable us to pull an all-nighter when we are already pooped.
5. **It can be strengthened through practice.** Like gradually increasing weight reps and then the amount of weight lifted, practicing doing small things like putting the dishes into the dishwasher immediately rather than leaving them on the counter, over and over, no matter what mood we're in, increases the amount of willpower energy available, not just for dish fastidiousness, but for anything we want to do that requires endurance.

So I'm Not Just a Wimpy Failure?

For just a minute, let's resist the urge to charge ahead into what all this means about how we can get more willpower, overcome all our past failures, and change the world. Instead, let's camp out for a sec on how this effects the ways we think about ourselves. How many of us, when we've failed a New Year's resolution, have thought, "Well, that just proves what I've suspected all along: I just don't have what it takes to change. I might as well just stop trying." Or maybe the messages come from outside, from a boss, parent, or significant other, saying, "Why

can't you be more like (insert name of annoyingly high-energy person)? They don't have any problem doing this. What's wrong with you?"

If we don't realize that it's just a fact of life that human beings have only a discrete amount of energy to make ourselves do difficult things, we can really beat ourselves up for not being able to do everything we think we should be able to do all at the same time. It can be even worse when our negative internal voices are joined by the voices of other people who miss the areas that we *are* exerting substantial willpower and highlight the areas that we're *not* focusing on because our willpower "plate" is already full.

Being unrealistic about the amount of energy humanly available for doing hard things at any one time can make us downright depressed if we keep dwelling on it. But having the humility to admit that, even if we expand our willpower with lots of self discipline exercises, there is still only so much we can do at once, that can be pretty darned freeing. Being "only human" is a big bummer; once we get over it, though, it's also a big relief!

Ten Ways to Make the Most of Your Willpower

Now that we've pulled our self esteem out of the toilet and ingested our recommended daily allowance of healthy humility, perhaps it's safe to move on to some things we can do to increase our success at making the changes we want, borrowing heavily from the research,* with some good 'ol fashioned experience added in. For starters, might be good to...

1. Observe where your willpower is going. Say you have about 100 willpower energy units available to you on an average day. You can add 50 more reserve units by consuming a bunch of more sugar (or caffeinated beverages, or alcohol, which becomes sugar), and maybe 50 more by tapping into some fear about what will happen if you don't reach your goal. For a few days, write down everything you did during the day that you did not really want to do in that moment—getting up, exercising, resisting temptation, eating well, being patient with kids, not snapping at your employees, resisting road rage, etc.—all those things that required willpower rather than coming naturally and easily.

If, at the end of several of the days you tracked, you had some good energy left over and found it easy to be nice to difficult people and keep your cool when your computer blew up, you're probably not using all 100 units each day. If you are falling into bed exhausted, but you kept your cool (barely!) and stuck to most of your goals, you're probably using your full 100 units. If you found yourself slacking at your efforts toward your current goals or losing your cool, or you notice that you really had to max out the sugar or fear to get your tasks done, you are probably trying to use more than 100 units per day (which is just fine short-term, but leads to burn out long-term). Based on whether you have lots of willpower left each day, just a touch, or are running a deficit, roughly estimate how many energy units of your 100 or more required are used up by each thing you do.

Now, if you are thinking of adding some goals that require a healthy chunk of willpower, estimate the number of energy units it would take each day to make yourself stick to that goal. Does it look like you have enough willpower energy left to spare for that right now? If not, go on to ...

2. Prioritize where your willpower goes. What drains your willpower that is actually not that important to you? Cleaning the bathrooms twice per week rather than once? Regularly calling that person who never calls you back, who you don't even like? Polishing your toenails in the

winter? See if you can give yourself permission to let enough of those things go to make room for the willpower required for the changes you'd really like to make. If that's not enough, see if you can...

3. Delegate tasks that are hard for you and not so hard for others. If balancing your checkbook and doing your taxes require Herculean effort for you, and you have the budget for it, bite the bullet and get an accountant. If your roommate doesn't mind vacuuming, but you hate it, while you don't mind raking leaves and she detests it, swap chores. Give yourself permission to not be good at everything and to let others use their strengths to make your life easier. Still not enough willpower energy units left for your goals? Then...

4. Do things that require the most willpower at the time you have the most energy. If you are a morning person with strong energy at 5 AM, or a night person with a power boost at 11 PM, that may be your best time to hit the gym, pray or meditate, prepare meals for the day, pay bills, or have that difficult conversation with your partner. Certain times during the week may be better, too, like scheduling that brain-intensive meeting for Wednesday morning, not Friday afternoon at 4 PM. See if you can get your natural energy rhythms to work for you. If you still are running out of willpower by day's end...

5. When you have energy, use your willpower to set up backup systems for when you run out. If you can stick to your food plan until 3 PM and then the siren cookies start calling, use your morning resolve to ask a friend to call you at 3 PM for two weeks to help you get through that lowest energy time. If you can bypass the liquor store every night except Saturday, use weekday energy to schedule activities with temperate friends each Saturday night. And if that doesn't work...

6. Make sure your brain has a steady energy supply. Big meals tend to drain energy, channeling it to digestion, which means it requires more effort to do difficult things after a big meal. Likewise, going more than 2-3 hours between a small meal or snack means your brain will likely run out of the glucose it needs for willpower. So it will take more energy to make yourself do difficult things while working against your body. Eating smaller meals and snacks throughout the day tends to support willpower by allowing energy to work for you, not against you. That means that any diet that requires long periods of time without energy-supplying foods is going to be *super* difficult (think 50 energy units per day!). Much better to eat slightly smaller portions of a wide variety of foods throughout the day and lose weight over the long haul, rather than trying to do it dramatically and all at once. The body needs glucose for the willpower to make choices that lead to weight loss. Still not enough energy left for change? Maybe it's time to...

7. Increase your overall amount of willpower with small practice tasks. Committing to making small changes regularly (like putting the dishes in the dishwasher ASAP every time), can gradually increase the overall amount of willpower available to you. So you may want to find a few practice brain or body tasks that require less energy than your major change goals, but that provide the endurance training that will eventually equip you to tackle those bigger goals. The key is to start small, but do them regularly: for example, adopting the mind "task" of deciding that every time the thought crosses your mind that you're a bad person for not quitting smoking yet, to make yourself think instead, "You are building your stamina for this change while using your energy to take good care of your ailing mom and your needy employees—keep it up!" or deciding to do calming breathing for 2 minutes per day, rain or shine. If sticking with small training tasks over time is not working, it may be that you have already built up your willpower energy plenty, and what you actually need is to ...

8. Take regular willpower vacations. Even the extreme sports people will tell you that to perform optimally, there are some days that you need to do nothing at all to let your body recover. It's the same with your mind. In fact, I've noticed that the best willpower rest seems to happen when 1) you make a conscious decision to not do anything that you don't want to do for a period of time and 2) you decide not to feel guilty about the things you aren't doing, taking a break from busy thoughts, too. Many people find that they are at their most effective, patient, and self-controlled when they let their mind take daily small vacations of 20-60 minutes, and weekly long vacations of 6-12 hours where they do absolutely nothing that they don't want to do. Letting the mind just wander, taking naps, playing a mindless video game, reading an easy book, walking slowly with no real purpose, sitting by a river and watching the water go by, and other no-effort activities give the brain time to store up the mental energy required for the rest of the day or week. Another way to renew willpower is to...

9. Regularly spend time with people who delight in you. Ever noticed that after a good conversation where you "clicked" with someone, your brain has more energy? You feel like you could do almost anything? This tends to be especially true when the person across from you is mature enough to listen well to you, notice things you do well, and encourage you. Negative, self-centered people, on the other hand, tend to require willpower to be with, rather than boosting yours. So increasing time with people who energize you, while minimizing time with downers and narcissists can do wonders for renewing willpower. And finally...

10. Keep at it until the change becomes rewarding. Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying that "fear pushes until vision pulls." In other words, willpower, fueled by fear and sugar, is typically required to start a change. But often, when you keep it up, you notice that the results are actually quite pleasant and you develop a vision of the way life can be after sustained change. Beginning exercise feels like torture. After about a month, though, you start noticing extra energy afterwards, less mental pain, better sleep, and all kinds of other rewards. As your brain starts associating exercise with these things, the Exercise = Suffering equation actually changes to Exercise = Feeling Good. When you do something long enough that a *should* becomes a *want*, it no longer requires tons of willpower. It's much easier to sustain and it frees your willpower for other things.

If you or someone you know would like help with change goals that feel stuck, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

*Check out articles and research sources for willpower here:

<http://www.inneridea.com/library/how-to-strengthen-willpower-part-1>

<http://www.inneridea.com/library/how-to-strengthen-willpower-part-2>

<http://www.psy.fsu.edu/~baumeistertice/pubs.html>

Book: *Willpower: the rediscovery of humans' greatest strength*, by Roy Baumeister and John Tierney. (2011) New York: Penguin Press.

Thanks for reading!

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