

THE BIG IDEAS

#1 Way to Build Willpower
= Meditation.

The Willpower Response:
Pause and plan.

Need a Willpower Boost?
Slow your breathing down.

The Wonder Drug
= Exercise.

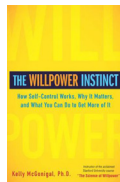
Small Self-Control Tests
Work wonders.

Reduce the Variability
Of your behavior.

Stress-Relief Strategies
Effective vs. Ineffective.

Be Nice to Yourself
Forgiveness > Self-criticism.

Burn the Ships!
& Precommit.



The Willpower Instinct

How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It

BY KELLY MCGONIGAL, PH.D. · AVERY © 2011 · 272 PAGES

“We may all have been born with the capacity for willpower, but some of us use it more than others. People who have better control of their attention, emotions, and actions are better off almost any way you look at it. They are happier and healthier. Their relationships are more satisfying and last longer. They make more money and go further in their careers. They are better able to manage stress, deal with conflict, and overcome adversity. They even live longer. When pit against other virtues, willpower comes out on top. Self-control is a better predictor of academic success than intelligence (take that, SATs), a stronger determinant of effective leadership than charisma (sorry, Tony Robbins), and more important for marital bliss than empathy (yes, the secret to lasting marriage may be learning how to keep your mouth shut). If we want to improve our lives, willpower is not a bad place to start.”

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D. from *The Willpower Instinct*

Willpower. It's huge.

The Willpower Instinct by award-winning Stanford Professor [Kelly McGonigal](#), Ph.D., is a GREAT book based on “The Science of Willpower” class Kelly teaches through Stanford University’s Continuing Studies program.

It’s *packed* with super practical Big Ideas on the newest, scientific insights about self-control that explain how we can “break old habits and create healthy habits, conquer procrastination, find our focus, and manage stress.” The book is incredibly well written and Kelly’s funny.

Me likes.

This is one of those books where I wish I had 50 pages to chat about all the goodness in it. If you’re feelin’ it, I HIGHLY recommend you check it out. I think you’ll love it.

For now, let’s jump in and take a peek at a few of my favorite Big Ideas on how we can get our willpower on! :)

THE #1 WAY TO BOOST YOUR WILLPOWER: MEDITATION

“There is growing scientific evidence that you can train your brain to get better at self-control. What does willpower training for your brain look like?”

Good news: We can train our brains to get better at self-control.

The #1 way to boost your willpower? Meditation.

In fact, “Neuroscientists have discovered that when you ask the brain to meditate, it gets better not just at meditating, but at a wide range of self-control skills, including attention, focus, stress management, impulse control, and self-awareness. People who meditate regularly aren’t just better at these things. Over time, their brains become finely tuned willpower machines. Regular

“If we try to save our energy by becoming willpower couch potatoes, we will lose the strength we have. But if we try to run a willpower marathon every day, we set ourselves up for total collapse. Our challenge is to train like an intelligent athlete, pushing our limits but also pacing ourselves.”

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"Meditation is not about getting rid of all your thoughts; it's learning not to get so lost in them that you forget what your goal is. Don't worry if your focus isn't perfect when meditating. Just practice coming back to the breath, again and again."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"Stress encourages you to focus on immediate, short-term goals and outcomes, but self-control requires keeping the big picture in mind. Learning how to better manage your stress is one of the most important things you can do to improve your willpower."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

meditators have more gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, as well as regions of the brain that support self-awareness."

We talk about meditation *a lot* throughout these Notes as it's become my #1 practice (as of this writing (March 13, 2012), Alexandra and I have meditated for at least 30 minutes every day for 3 1/2 years). I've always known that my practice has made me a significantly better human being in many ways but it's amazing to see the benefits of the practice so clearly articulated in a book about developing WILLPOWER.

Love it.

So...

How's YOUR meditation practice?

You have a practice yet?! If not, start simply: Just a couple minutes a day is *huge.*

Get this: "One study found that just three hours of meditation practice led to improved attention and self-control. After eleven hours, researchers could see those changes in the brain. The new meditators had increased neural connections between regions of the brain important for staying focused, ignoring distractions, and controlling impulses. Another study found that eight weeks of daily meditation practice led to increased self-awareness in everyday life, as well as increased gray matter in corresponding areas of the brain. It may seem incredible that our brains can reshape themselves so quickly, but meditation increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, in much the same way that lifting weights increases blood flow to your muscles. The brain appears to adapt to exercise in the same way that muscles do, getting both bigger and faster in order to get better at what you ask of it."

Here's to rockin' it!! :)

THE WILLPOWER RESPONSE: PAUSE-AND-PAN

"Suzanne Segerstrom, a psychologist at the University of Kentucky, studies how states of mind like stress and hope influence the body. She has found that, just like stress, self-control has a biological signature. The need for self-control sets into motion a coordinated set of changes in the brain and body that help you resist temptation and override self-destructive urges. Segerstrom calls those changes the pause-and-plan response, which couldn't look more different from the fight-or-flight response."

We talked about the fight-or-flight response in our Note on [Herbert Benson's](#) great book [The Relaxation Revolution](#).

Basic idea is simple: You feel stressed and your body launches into an ancient "fight-or-flight" response that was helpful when your life was threatened by a saber tooth tiger but not so helpful when you're stressed about your day at work.

This stress response destroys our willpower. To cultivate our self-control, we want to choose the "pause-and-plan" response—noticing our habitual responses and consciously choosing a more empowered one!

Some McGonigal mojo on that process: "Your brain needs to bring the body on board with your goals and put the brakes on your impulses. To do this, your prefrontal cortex will communicate the need for self-control to lower brain regions that regulate your heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and other automatic functions. The pause-and-plan response drives you in the opposite direction of the fight-or-flight response. Instead of speeding up, your heart slows down, and your blood pressure stays normal. Instead of hyperventilating like a madman, you take a deep breath. Instead of tensing muscles to prime them for action, your body relaxes a little."

There ya go.

"We wrongly but persistently expect to make different decisions tomorrow than we do today."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

Next time you feel the fight-or-flight stress response kicking in, see if you can shift to the willpower response of pausing and planning!! The best way to do that?

Well, meditation is a GREAT way to strengthen your prefrontal cortex muscles. And, in the moment try this out:

SLOW YOUR BREATHING DOWN

"You won't find many quick fixes in this book, but there is one way to immediately boost willpower: Slow your breathing down to four to six breaths per minute. That's ten to fifteen seconds per breath—slower than you normally breathe, but not difficult with a little bit of practice and patience. Slowing the breath down activates the prefrontal cortex and increases heart rate variability, which helps shift the brain and body from a state of stress to self-control mode. A few minutes of this technique will make you feel calm, in control, and capable of handling cravings or challenges."

Try it right now.

Get your stopwatch going on your smart phone and see how many breaths you're taking per minute right now.

See if you can slow it down so you're breathing in for a count of four and out for a count of six. Don't hold your breath (that just increases stress) and make sure your exhale is longer than your inhale (you trigger relaxation as you exhale completely).

Breathe in for a count of four... Out for a count of six...

In for a count of four... Out for a count of six...

Breathe in for a count of four... Out for a count of six.

Doesn't that feel *amazing*?! :)

(If you haven't done the exercise yet. Do it. Seriously. Training yourself to slow down your breath when you're starting to slip is H.U.G.E.)

Ah. That was nice. :)

THE WONDER DRUG OF EXERCISE

"Exercise turns out to be the closest thing to a wonder drug that self-control scientists have discovered. For starters, the willpower benefits of exercise are immediate. Fifteen minutes on a treadmill reduces cravings, as seen when researchers try to tempt dieters with chocolate and smokers with cigarettes. The long-term effects of exercise are even more impressive. It not only relieves ordinary, everyday stress, but it's as powerful an antidepressant as Prozac. Working out also enhances the biology of self-control by increasing baseline heart rate variability and training the brain. When neuroscientists have peered inside the brains of new exercisers, they have seen increases in both gray matter—brain cells—and white matter, the insulation on brain cells that helps them communicate quickly and efficiently with each other. Physical exercise—like meditation—makes your brain bigger and faster, and the prefrontal cortex shows the largest training effect."

We now have the Top 3 practices to boost our willpower:

1. Meditation
2. Slow Breathing
3. Exercise

Sounds like a great set of fundamentals, eh?

"If you tell yourself that you are too tired or don't have the time to exercise, start thinking of exercise as something that restores, not drains, your energy and willpower."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

BUILD THE MUSCLE W/SMALL SELF-CONTROL EXERCISES

"When you're trying to make a big change or transform an old habit, look for a small way to practice self-control that strengthens your willpower, but doesn't overwhelm it completely."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"Other studies have found that committing to any small, consistent act of self-control—improving your posture, squeezing a handgrip every day to exhaustion, cutting back on sweets, and keeping track of your spending—can increase overall willpower. And while these small self-control exercises may seem inconsequential, they appear to improve the willpower challenges we care about most, including focusing at work, taking good care of our health, resisting temptation, and feeling more in control of our emotions."

Love this idea.

We touched on the fact that we can develop our self-control muscles in our Note on [Succeed](#) where [Heidi Grant Halvorson](#) tells us: "If you want more self-control, you can get more. And you get more self-control the same way you get bigger muscles—you've got to give it regular workouts. Recent research has shown that engaging in daily activities such as exercising, keeping track of your finances or what you are eating—or even just remembering to sit up straight every time you think of it—can help you develop your overall self-control capacity. For example, in one study, students who were assigned to (and stuck to) a daily exercise program not only got physically healthier, but they also became more likely to wash dishes instead of leaving them in the sink, and less likely to impulsively spend money."

Here's some more wisdom from McGonigal on why starting small is so powerful: "The important 'muscle' action being trained in all these studies isn't the specific willpower challenge of meeting deadlines, using your left hand to open doors, or keeping the F-word to yourself. It's the habit of noticing what you are about to do, and choosing to do the more difficult thing instead of the easiest. Through each of these willpower exercises, the brain gets used to pausing before acting. The triviality of the assignments may even help this process. The tasks are challenging, but they're not overwhelming. And while the self-restraints require careful attention, they're unlikely to trigger strong feelings of deprivation. ("What do you mean I'm not allowed to say 'yeah'?!?!? That's the only thing that gets me through the day!") The relative unimportance of the willpower challenges allowed participants to exercise the muscle of self-control without the internal angst that derails so many of our attempts to change."

REDUCE THE VARIABILITY OF YOUR BEHAVIOR

"Aim to reduce the variability of your behavior day to day. View every choice you make as a commitment to all future choices. So instead of asking, "Do I want to eat this candy bar now?" ask yourself, "Do I want the consequences of eating a candy bar every afternoon for the next year?" Or if you've been putting something off that you know you should do, instead of asking "Would I rather do this today or tomorrow?" ask yourself, "Do I really want the consequences of always putting this off?"

I just *love* the idea of aiming to reduce the variability of our behaviors day to day. That's *really* powerful.

When do you get stuck making poor decisions? (For me, it's wasting time online.)

Do you want the consequences of making that less-than-optimal decision every day of your life? I certainly don't. And, when viewed from that perspective, it's a lot easier to make the right choice!

"We are driven to chase pleasure, but often at the cost of our well-being."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

TRY A STRESS-RELIEF STRATEGY THAT WORKS

"While many of the most popular stress-relief strategies fail to make us feel better, some strategies really work. According to the American Psychological Association, the most effective stress-relief strategies are exercising or playing sports, praying or attending a religious service, reading, listening to music, spending time with friends or family, getting a massage, going

"The next time you're feeling stressed and about to reach for the promise of relief, consider trying a more effective stress reliever instead."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

outside for a walk, meditating or doing yoga, and spending time with a creative hobby. (The least effective strategies are gambling, shopping, smoking, drinking, eating, playing video games, surfing the Internet, and watching TV or movies for more than two hours.)"

How do you try to reduce your stress?

You lean toward the effective strategies like exercise, playing sports, praying, reading, hanging out with friends or yoga? Or do you tend to go after the ineffective stress-relief strategies like surfing the Internet, watching TV, drinking, or playing video games?

In the book, McGonigal tells us about how our brain works and what's going on as we seek different states of being and why some strategies work and some don't.

In her words: "The main difference between the strategies that work and the strategies that don't? Rather than releasing dopamine and relying on the promise of reward, the real stress relievers boost mood-enhancing brain chemicals like serotonin and GABA, as well as the feel-good hormone oxytocin. They also help shut down the brain's stress response, reduce stress hormones in the body, and induce the healing relaxation response. Because they aren't exciting like the dopamine releasers, we tend to underestimate how good they will make us feel. And so we forget about these strategies not because they don't work, but because when we're stressed, our brains persistently mis-predict what will make us happy. This means that we'll often talk ourselves out of doing the very thing that will actually make us feel better."

Fascinating stuff.

Check out the book for more goodness.

For now, take a look at the effective vs. ineffective strategies above and see if you can employ the good ones more and more often!!

BE NICE TO YOURSELF!

"Take a twenty-four-hour break from TV news, talk radio, magazines, or websites that profit from your fear. If the world doesn't end without you watching every private and global crisis unfold (prediction: It won't), consider cutting out mindless consumption of these media."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"If you think that the key to greater willpower is being harder on yourself, you are not alone. But you are wrong. Study after study shows that self-criticism is consistently associated with less motivation and worse self-control. It is also one of the single biggest predictors of depression, which drains both "I will" power and "I want" power. In contrast, self-compassion—being supportive and kind to yourself, especially in the face of stress and failure—is associated with more motivation and better self-control. Consider, for example, a study at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, that tracked the procrastination of students over an entire semester. Lots of students put off studying for the first exam, but not every student made it a habit. Students who were harder on themselves for procrastinating on their first exam were more likely to procrastinate on later exams than students who forgave themselves. The harder they were on themselves about procrastinating the first time, the longer they procrastinated for the next exam! Forgiveness—not guilt—helped them get back on track."

Well there's a Big Idea, eh?!

It's important that we hold high standards AND it's really important that we're nice to ourselves when we fall short. That constant self-criticism is a great way to make sure we continue doing the very things we want to change!

Remember: "Everybody makes mistakes and experiences setbacks. How we handle these setbacks matters more than the fact that they happened."

Here's another powerful idea to keep in mind: "We all have the tendency to believe self-doubt and self-criticism, but listening to this voice never gets us closer to our goals. Instead, try on the point of view of a mentor or good friend who believes in you, wants the best for you, and will encourage you when you feel discouraged."

"In the quest for self-control, the usual weapons we wield against ourselves—guilt, stress, and shame—don't work. People who have the greatest self-control aren't waging self-war. They have learned to accept and integrate these competing selves."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

BURN THE SHIPS & PRECOMMIT

"Cortés knew that when they faced their first battle, the crew would be tempted to retreat if they knew they had the option to sail away. So according to legend, he ordered his officers to set the ships on fire. The ships—Spanish galleons and caravels—were made entirely of wood and waterproofed with an extremely flammable pitch. Cortés lit the first torch, and as his men destroyed the ships, they burned to the water line and sank. This is one of history's most notorious examples of committing one's future self to a desired course of action. In sinking his ships, Cortés demonstrated an important insight into human nature. While we may feel brave and tireless when we embark on an adventure, our future selves may be derailed by fear and exhaustion. Cortés burned those ships to guarantee that his men didn't act on their fear. He left the crew—and all their future selves—with no choice but to go forward. This is a favorite story of behavioral economists who believe that the best strategy for self-control is, essentially, to burn your ships. One of the first proponents of this strategy was Thomas Schelling, a behavioral economist who won the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for his Cold War theory of how nuclear powers can manage conflict. Schelling believed that to reach our goals, we must limit our options. He called this precommitment."

Burn the ships!! Limiting our options thru precommitment is one of the best ways to make sure we don't act on our fear/impulses. Super powerful stuff.

One of the coolest precommitment stories out there is of the writer who removed his wireless and uninstalled everything but his word processing program from his computer. He's now precommitted to writing on that computer not wasting time.

How can *you* precommit? Get on that and here's to developing our willpower!!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "The Willpower Instinct"

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Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., is an award-winning psychology instructor at Stanford University, as well as a health educator for the School of Medicine's Health Improvement Program. She is also the author of Psychology Today's "Science of Willpower" blog and lives in Palo Alto, California. (Learn more about Kelly and her work at kellymcgonigal.com.)

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.