

THE BIG IDEAS

Eat Your Way to Willpower

No glucose, no willpower.

Exercise Self-Control

And improve your life.

Precommitment.

It's huge.

Tidy Up!

And improve your willpower.

Meditation

Anaerobic conditioning for self-control.

Bright Lines

Are good lines.

Commitment Strategies

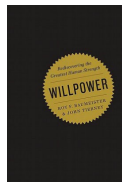
Use them to conserve willpower.

The Willpower Game

Play offense rather than defense.

"Improving willpower is the surest way to a better life."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney



Willpower

Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength

BY ROY F. BAUMEISTER AND JOHN TIERNEY · PENGUIN GROUP © 2011 · 304 PAGES

"The result, after dozens of experiments in Baumeister's lab and hundreds elsewhere, is a new understanding of willpower and of the self. We want to tell you what's been learned about human behavior, and how you can use it to change yourself for the better. Acquiring self-control isn't as magically simple as the techniques in modern self-help books, but neither does it have to be as grim as the Victorians made it out to be. Ultimately, self-control lets you relax because it removes stress and enables you to conserve willpower for the important challenges. We're confident that this book's lessons can make your life not just more productive and fulfilling but also easier and happier. And we can guarantee that you will not have to endure any sermons against bare ankles."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney from *Willpower*

Willpower.

It's ESSENTIAL to optimizing our lives.

In fact, in their *great* book, *Willpower*, Roy Baumeister (one of the world's leading scientific researchers on self-control) and John Tierney (science writer for the *New York Times*) tell us that *"Improving willpower is the surest way to a better life."*

I absolutely loved this book. It's an easy read and packed with goodness.

I'm excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas on how we can get our willpower on!

Let's jump in.

EAT YOUR WAY TO WILLPOWER

"Now that we've surveyed the problems caused by lack of glucose, we can turn to solutions and to cheerier topics, like good meals and long naps. Here are some lessons and strategies for putting glucose to work for you: Feed the beast. By beast, we don't mean Beelzebub. We mean the potential demon inside you or anyone spending time with you. Glucose depletion can turn the most charming companion into a monster. The old advice about eating a good breakfast applies all day long, particularly on days when you're physically or mentally stressed. If you have a test, an important meeting, or a vital project, don't take it on without glucose. Don't get into an argument with your boss four hours after lunch. Don't thrash out serious problems with your partner just before dinner."

Glucose.

It's the key to willpower.

Seriously. :)

As Baumeister and Tierney tell us: *"No glucose, no willpower."*

"Self-control is a vital strength and key to success in life."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

The quickest way to blow your willpower is to let your glucose get low. So, don't make any important decisions or discuss any serious issues when you need to eat.

Some tips on how to keep the glucose steady: "To maintain steady self-control, you're better off eating foods with a low glycemic index: most vegetables, nuts (like peanuts and cashews), many raw fruits (like apples, blueberries, and pears), cheese, fish, meat, olive oil, and other "good" fats. (These low-glycemic foods may also help keep you slim.)"

EXERCISE SELF-CONTROL: IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

"Exercising self-control in one area seemed to improve all areas of life. They smoked fewer cigarettes and drank less alcohol. They kept their homes cleaner. They washed dishes instead of leaving them stacked in the sink, and did their laundry more often. They procrastinated less. They did their work and chores instead of watching television or hanging out with friends first. They ate less junk food, replacing their bad eating habits with healthier ones."

We touched on this Idea in our Notes on [Heidi Grant Halvorson](#)'s great book [Succeed](#) and [Kelly McGonigal](#)'s equally great book [The Willpower Instinct](#).

Here's how McGonigal puts it in [The Willpower Instinct](#): "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."

"For most of us, though, the problem is not a lack of goals but rather too many of them."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

Good to know: As we build self-control in one aspect of our lives we tend to build more self-control across other domains.

Me likes. :)

PRECOMMITMENT

"The essence of this strategy is to lock yourself into a virtuous path. You recognize that you'll face terrible temptations to stray from the path, and that your willpower will weaken. So you make it impossible—or somehow unthinkably disgraceful or sinful—to leave the path. Precommitment is what Odysseus and his men used to get past the deadly songs of the Sirens. He had himself lashed to the mast with orders not to be untied no matter how much he pleaded to be freed to go to the Sirens. His men used a different form of precommitment by plugging their ears so they couldn't hear the Sirens' songs. They prevented themselves from being tempted at all, which is generally the safer of the two approaches. If you want to be sure you don't gamble at a casino, you're better off staying out of it rather than strolling past the tables and counting on your friends to stop you from placing a bet. Better yet is to put your name on the list of people (maintained by casinos in some states) who are not allowed to collect any money if they place winning bets."

Precommitment.

It's H.U.G.E.

Whether you're Odysseus or a normal mortal, it's *much* easier to decide in advance what you will or will not do then wait until the heat of the moment.

Here's how [Kelly McGonigal](#) puts it in her [The Willpower Instinct](#): "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

"To get the most out of your willpower, use it to set aside enough time to sleep. You'll behave better the next day—and sleep more easily the next night."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

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."

Here's some more mojo from Baumeister and Tierney: "Of course, it's even easier to avoid running up debt at a clothing store if you go there without a credit card. Precommitment is the ultimate offensive weapon. Buy junk food in small packages or keep them out of the kitchen altogether. Plan meals by the week, rather than on the spur of the moment when it's already past dinnertime and you're starving. If you're planning to have a child, set up an automatic payroll deduction plan to build up a nest egg of ten thousand dollars so you're not stressed out by money during those first sleepdeprived months of parenthood. If you have a gambling problem and are going someplace where there's a casino, sign up ahead of time for the self-exclusion list (which will prevent you from collecting any winnings). To precommit to the Nothing Alternative, use a software program (like the one named Freedom) that locks you off the Internet for a set period."

How can YOU step up your precommitment and play some more offense?! :)

Get on that!

TIDY UP!

"Another simple old-fashioned way to boost your willpower is to expend a little of it on neatness. As we described in chapter 7, people exert less self-control after seeing a messy desk than after seeing a clean desk, or when using a sloppy rather than a neat and well organized Web site. You may not care about whether your bed is made and your desk is clean, but these environmental cues subtly influence your brain and your behavior, making it ultimately less of a strain to maintain self-discipline. Order seems to be contagious."

How amazing is that?

The tidiness of our environment affects our willpower.

* organizes desk a bit *

You make your bed this morning?

House clean?

Desk tidy?

We may not be consciously aware of it, but research shows that environmental cues subtly influence our brain and our behavior so here's to investing a bit of our willpower to creating a little more order in our lives! :)

"The Two-Minute Rule: If something will take less than two minutes, don't put it on a list. Get it out of the way immediately."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

MEDITATION: ANAEROBIC WORKOUT FOR SELF-CONTROL

"Religious meditations often involve explicit and effortful regulation of attention. The beginner's exercise in Zen meditation is to count one's breaths up to ten and then do it again, over and over. The mind wanders quite naturally, so bringing it back to focus narrowly on one's breathing

" People with good self-control mainly use it not for rescue in emergencies but rather to develop effective habits and routines in school and at work."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

builds mental discipline. So does saying the rosary, chanting Hebrew psalms, repeating Hindu mantras. When neuroscientists observe people praying or meditating, they see strong activity in two parts of the brain that are also important for self-regulation and control of attention. Psychologists see an effect when they expose people to religious words subliminally, meaning that the words are flashed on a screen so quickly that the people aren't consciously aware of what they've seen. People who are subliminally exposed to religious words like God or Bible become slower to recognize words associated with temptations like drugs or premarital sex. "It looks as if people come to associate religion with tamping down these temptations," says McCullough, who suggests that prayers and meditation rituals are "a kind of anaerobic workout for self-control."

I just love that image of prayers/meditation as "anaerobic workouts for self-control."

Just like we go to the gym to build our muscles, we sit in silence meditating to build our mental muscles.

It doesn't matter whether we're counting our breaths from one to ten or saying the rosary, chanting Hebrew psalms or repeating Hindu mantras.

They ALL build our mental discipline.

And, as we know by this point, having the ability to put our attention where we want, when we want is a VERY good thing.

Plus, we also get the benefits of eliciting what [Herbert Benson](#) calls "The Relaxation Response" (see Notes).

Here's a little more McGonigal wisdom from [The Willpower Instinct](#): "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."

Powerful stuff.

You meditating yet?

Now a good time to start/turn up your practice? :)

" Focus on one project at a time. If you set more than one self-improvement goal, you may succeed for a while by drawing on reserves to power through, but that just leaves you more depleted and more prone to serious mistakes later."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

BRIGHT LINES

"He needs the help of "bright lines," a term that Ainslie borrows from lawyers. These are clear, simple, unambiguous rules. You can't help but notice when you cross a bright line. If you promise yourself to drink or smoke "moderately," that's not a bright line. It's a fuzzy boundary with no obvious point at which you go from moderation to excess. Because the transition is so gradual and your mind is so adept at overlooking your own peccadilloes, you may fail to notice when you've gone too far. So you can't be sure you're always going to follow the rule to drink moderately. In contrast, zero tolerance is a bright line: total abstinence with no exceptions anytime. It's not practical for all self-control problems—a dieter cannot stop eating all food—but it works well in many situations. Once you're committed to following a bright-line rule, your present self can feel confident that your future self will observe it, too. And if you believe that the rule is sacred—a commandment from God, the unquestionable law of a higher power—then it becomes an especially bright line. You have more reason to expect your future self to respect it,

"The results showed that a narrow, concrete, here-and-now focus works against self-control, whereas a broad, abstract, long-term focus supports it."

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

and therefore your belief becomes a form of self-control: a self-fulfilling mandate. I think I won't, therefore I don't."

Bright lines.

This is another incredible idea.

As we discuss often throughout these Notes, 99% is a challenge; 100% is a breeze. (Thanks, Jack Canfield!)

As Baumeister and Tierney point out, it's a LOT easier to say you're simply not going to drink than to say you're going to drink "moderately."

It's also a lot easier to say you will meditate every day for at least 10 minutes than to say you'll meditate "more often."

One's a fuzzy line.

The other is a BRIGHT line.

We want bright lines.

You have any fuzzy commitments you can brighten up?

What can you make a 100% (!!!) non-negotiable commitment to?

Get on that. And, know that it's a LOT easier to make that clear, bright-lined precommitment than it is to stay fuzzy!

CONSERVE WILLPOWER THRU COMMITMENT STRATEGIES

"When you're not starving, when you have glucose, you can prepare for the battle of the bulge with some of the classic self-control strategies, starting with precommitment. The ultimate surefire form of precommitment—the true equivalent of Odysseus tying himself to the mast—would be gastric bypass surgery, which would physically prevent you from eating, but there are lots of more modest forms. You can begin by simply keeping fattening food out of reach and out of sight. You'll conserve willpower (as the women in the experiment did when the M&M's were moved out of reach) at the same time that you're avoiding calories. In one experiment, office workers ate a third less candy when it was kept inside a drawer rather than on top of their desks. A simple commitment strategy for avoiding late-night snacking is to brush your teeth early in the evening, while you're still full from dinner and before the late-night-snacking temptation sets in. Although it won't physically prevent you from eating, brushing your teeth is such an ingrained pre-bedtime habit that it unconsciously cues you not to eat anymore. On a conscious level, moreover, it makes snacking seem less attractive: You have to balance your greedy impulse for sugar against your lazy impulse to avoid having to brush your teeth again."

This is great.

Reminds me of [Dan Millman](#)'s great wisdom from *Everyday Enlightenment* (see Notes) where he tells us: "Make any positive behavior as convenient as possible. To break my habit of snacking in the evenings, I keep dental floss and a toothbrush in the downstairs bathroom near the kitchen. Right after dinner I floss and brush. I'm far less likely to snack, because if I eat something, I have to floss and brush all over again.

Make any negative behavior as inconvenient as possible. To smoke less, keep only one pack of cigarettes at home, in a small locked safe under some luggage in the closet in the garage. You might also put the television in that same closet, so you take it out only for special events, and use your old TV time writing that book, painting that picture, or learning a new language. In this way you replace old negative routines with new behaviors, pouring new energy into a new you."

There ya go.

How can you implement some commitment strategies to *your* life?!

WILLPOWER GAME: PLAY OFFENSE INSTEAD OF DEFENSE

*"Forget about self-esteem.
Work on self-control."*

~ Roy Baumeister & John Tierney

"People with good self-control mainly use it not for rescue in emergencies but rather to develop effective habits and routines in school and at work. The results of these habits and routines were demonstrated in yet another recent set of studies, in the United States, showing that people with high self-control consistently report less stress in their lives. They use their self-control not to get through crises but to avoid them. They give themselves enough time to finish a project; they take the car to the shop before it breaks down; they stay away from all-you-can-eat buffets. They play offense instead of defense."

Love this.

We want to use our willpower to develop effective habits—playing offense instead of defense.

We want to use our willpower *"Not to get through crises but to avoid them."*

The result?

We live with a *lot* less stress.

So, let's get on that! :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Willpower Instinct](#)

[The Power of Habit](#)

[Succeed](#)

[The How of Happiness](#)

[The Happiness Hypothesis](#)

About the Author of "Willpower"

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Roy F. Baumeister directs the social psychology program at Florida State University. He has written for more than 450 scientific publications and consistently ranks among the world's most frequently cited psychologists. This is his twenty-eighth book.



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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.