



e-quilibrium

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Willpower

If desire is defined as wanting to have or do something, how much of the time do we experience desire? According to an article recently published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, the simple answer is much of the time. Using a study design in which participants reported their experience of desire at 7 random points each day over the period of a week (the study accumulated nearly 8000 reporting episodes), participants reported a current desire nearly 50% of the time, and a recent desire approximately 27% of the time.

The most common desires reported were related to physiological needs: eat (28%), sleep (10%) and drink (9%). Other desires reported included media use (8%), leisure (7%), social contact (7%), activities related to personal hygiene (6%), tobacco use (5%), sex (5%), coffee (3%), and alcohol (3%), among others. Participants also reported the strength of their desire on a scale of 0 (none) to 7 (irresistible).

A desire may or may not conflict with a person's goal at a given point in time. There is no conflict when the desire to sleep occurs at bedtime, whereas conflict is significant when the desire to sleep occurs during an important meeting with the boss. Willpower, or self-control, is what we use to resist desires when there is conflict (i.e., when one's desire is at odds with goals or situational factors).

As noted in this study, people reported some current desire approximately half of the time they were awake. Importantly, about half of these desires were in conflict with goals, values, or situational factors. What this means is that

willpower was needed during about 25% of waking hours. How effective was willpower for study participants? Overall, quite good, but failure at resisting desire occurred 17% of the time. When the desire was rated as “irresistible,” failure occurred 26% of the time.

Aside from intelligence, willpower (self-control) is argued to be the best predictor of success in numerous spheres in life. And obviously, failures of self-control are associated with a multitude of problems in life, including relationship problems, financial difficulties, crime, and a myriad of health problems. Self-control is widely regarded to be a resource we all have but in limited supply, so that expenditures of self-control can eventually deplete the resource. Numerous experiments have demonstrated this phenomenon. In the research mentioned above, self-control was expended with regard to behavioral desires, but self-control is also utilized to control thoughts and emotions.

Recent investigations indicate that there is an increase in the utilization of glucose in the brain when an individual is engaging in self-regulation (i.e., using willpower). Correspondingly, it has been demonstrated that taking in energy (i.e., consuming food) effectively replenishes self-control. That is, self-control requires fuel. Furthermore, it is also known that self-control can be strengthened through practice, and replenished through rest (sleep) and the experience of positive emotions.

While the model of self-control as a reservoir that can get drained (as well as refilled) applies to everyone, some people seem to have more trait self-control than others. How do such people differ from those who have less trait self-control? In the study of desire described earlier, participants higher in trait self-control were actually not found to be better at resisting desires than others. Rather, they appeared to be more effective at proactively avoiding temptations. That is, they managed their environments (and/or controlled the environments in which they placed themselves) so that there was less demand to expend willpower. Rather than having more self-control in their reservoirs, they seemed to be more effective at avoiding situations in which they would have to resist desires.

There are numerous implications of the research on willpower (self-control):

- Self-control is a critical factor for success in many areas of life.
- Self-control is a limited resource that can be replenished.
- Desires that conflict with goals are experienced in nearly a quarter of our waking hours, so there is a heavy demand on self-control.
- There are several things people can do to increase the likelihood that available willpower will be adequate to meet the demands on self control, including:
 - Keeping the body fueled (eating breakfast; emphasizing low glycemic index foods --- healthy foods; eating frequent, small, healthy meals)
 - Getting plentiful rest (sleep)
 - Practicing self-control intentionally (at times when self-control isn't vulnerable to being depleted)
 - Experiencing positive emotions
 - Avoiding environments that are replete with temptations, when possible

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