



# e-quilibrium

- "electronic briefs on behavior and health"

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## Healthy Impulsivity?

Self-control appears to work like a muscle. It is a resource that can be utilized, until it is used up. Just as muscles can become fatigued, self-control can be depleted. After rest, muscle strength is again available. Self-control can be replenished with nourishment (calories) and rest. Both muscle strength and self-control are enhanced with practice.

In most cases, healthy choices are easier to make when in a state of higher self-control. For example, people are advised to buy groceries on a full stomach, rather than when hungry. Conversely, unhealthy snacking frequently occurs when persons are stressed or tired (i.e, depleted). Because the environment has more cues to eat unhealthy foods than healthy ones, self-control is necessary to override the unhealthy cues. When self-control is depleted, one is more likely to impulsively respond to environmental cues. In such situations, one may not have the energy or the will to give thought to the quality of food choices, so what occurs is mindless eating of what is most readily available, prominent, or compelling.

One type of social cue that influences human behavior has been labeled the *social proof heuristic*. This is the tendency to choose what other people prefer. For example, hotel patrons tripled their reuse of towels when a sign was placed in rooms indicating that the majority of people using the hotel reused their towels.

Several Scandinavian investigators recently tested the hypothesis that people in states of low self-control would make healthy food choices, IF the most prominent cues in their

environment were for healthy foods. In other words, they sought to exploit the impulsivity that accompanies self-control depletion by exposing vulnerable people to healthy cues. Capitalizing on the *social proof heuristic*, they provided depleted individuals with statistical information about the choices others made regarding food items. For example, when faced with the choice between a cereal bar or a chocolate bar, participants were provided with a chart indicating that 85% of people choose a cereal bar over a chocolate bar. Consistent with the hypothesis, such cuing resulted in the depleted participants being more likely to make the healthier choice of the cereal bar. Perhaps surprisingly, the social cuing did not appear to influence participants who were not in a depleted state, so that they actually were less likely to choose the healthier cereal bar than were the depleted participants. Of course, in the absence of any cuing, depleted individuals were more likely to choose the chocolate bar than were those not in a depleted state. The investigators concluded, as reported in the current issue of *Health Psychology*, that participants in a state of low self-control were actually more susceptible to the influence of the social cue than were those in a high self-control state.

Without question, food industries influence food choices with a variety of cues, including the advertising of foods and the placement of foods in supermarkets. Certainly these cues affect food choices, in part because such choices are often made impulsively in states of low self-control (i.e., buying groceries after a long day at work, eating at a restaurant when very hungry, etc.). The study described above suggests that strong cues for healthy choices might influence food choices in a healthy direction when people are in states of low self-control.

On a more personal level, perhaps this study could prompt examination of cues in one's own home for food choices. What cues affect snacking or other food consumption, especially when self-control is likely to be depleted (e.g., arriving home after school or work)? How might such cues be modified so that healthy food consumption would be the impulsive choice?

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