

TAKE CONTROL HOW TO BOOST YOUR WILLPOWER

Willpower is something many of us battle with, but the latest findings show that getting better, stronger willpower is not as hard as you thought it would be. Dr William Sukala shows you how.



“The good news is you’re not necessarily a prisoner to your biology.”

We can be our own worst critics at times. One little slip of the diet and nobody comes down harder on us than ourselves.

That little voice in the back of our head chimes in; ‘Why did I have that second serve of ice-cream?’, ‘Why did I have to keep eating that delicious pasta, now I could burst!’

or ‘Why can’t I just have one piece of chocolate, instead of devouring the entire block?’ Then we chide ourselves for a hopeless lack of willpower. Sound familiar?

Now, science has a greater understanding of how our

willpower works, which we can use to help improve and master our self control.

Where we may have imagined willpower to be something like an iron shutter that we mentally pull on to make the right choices, it is in fact the result of a number of internal factors (such as your hormones).

“Why did I have that second serve of ice-cream?” These factors at any given moment

can contribute to how much willpower we have.

The good news is you’re not necessarily a prisoner to your biology. The following practical steps can help you to whip your willpower into shape, and free you from feelings of self-blame. >



Dr William Sukala is a clinical exercise physiologist and lecturer. He is also an industry consultant and regular speaker. www.drbilliofhealth.com.

Diets are your willpower's worst enemy

Many popular diets focus on kilojoule restriction which, from a willpower perspective, may actually work against you. This is because your brain uses blood sugar from food as its primary fuel source. So, the more you restrict yourself and the food you eat, the more you deplete your blood sugar levels, which in turn makes it harder to make healthy food choices later.

Restoring and maintaining stable blood sugar levels can improve your self-control and reduce impulse decisions.

Dieting also alters your hunger

and satiety hormones, namely ghrelin and leptin. Ghrelin sends signals to the brain that stimulate your appetite, whereas leptin tells you to put down the fork.

Dr. Amanda Sainsbury-Salis, Research Fellow at the Boden Institute of Obesity, Nutrition, Exercise, and Eating Disorders, says "chemical changes occur in the brain in response to several weeks or months of dieting, increased exercise, or both.

"In the face of elevated ghrelin and reduced leptin levels, resisting hunger can be extremely difficult."

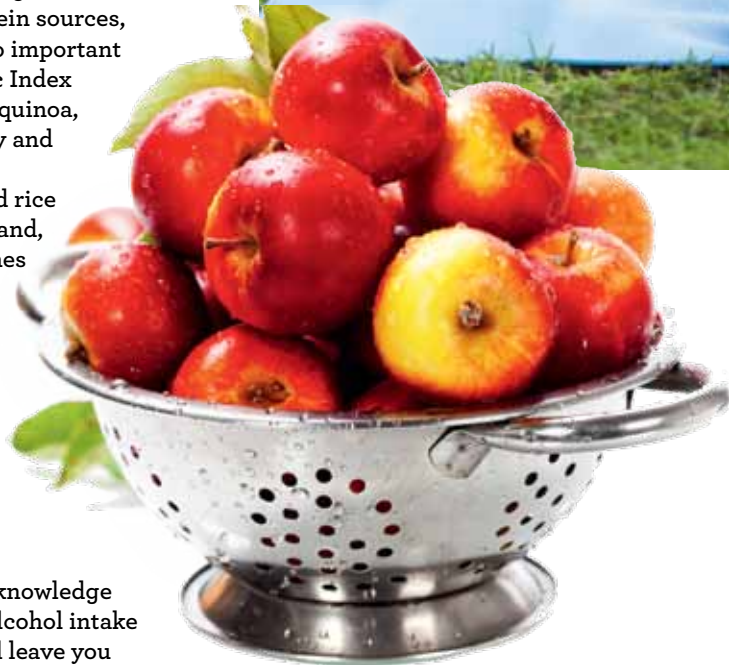
Action step

Avoid the crash diets and eat a nutrient dense diet which includes wholegrains, fruits, vegetables and lean protein sources, such as chicken and fish. It's also important to eat foods with a lower Glycaemic Index (GI), such as brown rice, multigrain bread or quinoa, because they tend to leave the stomach slowly and give a more sustained rise in energy.

Refined foods such as biscuits, cakes, puffed rice cereals, white bread and chips, on the other hand, lead to 'boom and bust' cycles. These are rushes of energy followed by slumps, which leave you craving another energy fix.

Spacing meals out over the day and allowing yourself a healthy snack (such as a piece of fruit or a tub of yoghurt) when you feel hungry will help to maintain stable energy levels and sustain your healthy eating habits.

Ignoring a growling tummy will only leave you open to overeating at your next meal or making poor food choices. So it's better to acknowledge hunger and have a small snack. Watch your alcohol intake too, as this can reduce blood sugar levels, and leave you more prone to cravings.



"Ignoring a growling tummy will only leave you open to overeating at meal times or making poor food choices."



Meditation improves willpower

Meditation can change both the structure and function of the brain to enhance components of willpower, such as attention, focus, stress management, impulse control and self-awareness.

In a 2007 Chinese study, subjects performed 20 minutes of meditation and mindfulness techniques each day for five days. They experienced improved efficiency in how the brain focuses its attention, which resulted in better emotional regulation.

Participants also had more vigour as well as less anxiety, depression, anger and fatigue - all of which can impinge on your self-control.

Action step

Learn how to calm the internal mental chatter that can compromise healthy lifestyle choices. Enrol in a local meditation class in your community. Or, you can try a free online meditation course at meditation.org.au.

Tiredness reduces self-control

There really is no substitute for a good night's sleep. A 2010 report published in *Progress in Brain Research* suggests brain regions involved in willpower and decision making are susceptible to sleep deprivation.

Though the specifics are not yet fully understood, impairments in the brain's higher reasoning centres may reduce your control over cravings when you're tired.

Action step

Though specific sleep requirements vary from person to person, you should aim for a window of seven to nine hours of sleep each night. Minimise lengthy daytime naps which might alter your natural circadian rhythm and compromise your sleep at night.





Exercise can boost willpower

Physical exercise has been shown to improve health on many fronts, including willpower. In a 2006 study at Macquarie University in Sydney, subjects performed regular gym exercise (aerobic exercise and weight training) for four months. They reported an increase in their emotional control, attendance to commitments and healthy eating. They ate less 'junk' food and reduced their caffeine and alcohol intake.

Action step

Find your favourite exercise and do it regularly! Try to get at least 30 minutes of accumulated moderate-intensity activity at least five days per week. Getting out for a daily walk or bike ride can be a great way to connect with nature. Also, try to maximise the time you spend on your feet. This incidental 'background' movement has also been shown to help keep weight under control and improve overall health.

Simple goals work best for willpower

Dr. Roy Baumeister at Florida State University in the United States has shown willpower can be trained like your triceps, but can become temporarily weakened by trying to achieve too many tasks at once.

"Instead of trying to overhaul your entire diet overnight, make small changes instead."

In order to maximise the benefits of willpower, let your brain tackle one goal at a time rather than attempt to tame ten.

Action step

Break large goals into smaller, more manageable ones. Instead of trying to overhaul your entire diet overnight, make small achievable changes instead. Accredited Practising Dietitian and health coach Shivaun Conn recommends these tactics to get you on track:

- Control your portion size by swapping a large dinner plate for a smaller entrée-sized one.
- If you feel emotional hunger setting in (such as needing to soothe yourself with food), distract yourself by getting out for a brisk walk with a co-worker, friend, partner, or even your dog.
- If tempted to plop down on the couch to watch TV with an after-dinner snack, trade off the snack for some light stretching and core exercises in front of the box.
- For work meetings, opt for a 'walk-and-talk' instead of the usual sit down discussions. [hfg](#)