The Willpower Paradox
Doug Lisle, March 2013 McDougall Weekend (65 mins.),
Mary Rooker’s Notes, ShamanicSpring.com/food.html

Summary

Our modern environment is super-normal-stimulating on food (and other areas of life). Animals, including humans, are fooled by and become addicted to foods that are super-stimulating and high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar. This "pleasure trap" persuades us to eat these foods even though they’re self-destructive. The pleasure trap is fed and tempted everywhere. In nature, you can follow your instincts and you’ll be fine. In our highly stimulating environment, your instincts can be hijacked. All animals make similar "instinctual" mistakes when presented with an artificial, unnatural supernormal-stimulus food or substance.

Modern living is also preventing us from getting exercise, triggering our brain’s programming to conserve energy: maximum energy conservation is possible, in that many can earn enough money to live with little exercise.

Self-Regulation: What Drives It?

The issue is the ability to self-regulate, and it’s key to willpower.

Humans can put a person on the moon; more than any other animal we know, we are uniquely capable of complex, long-term planning and thinking and execution. We don’t lack willpower.

Freud was wrong about the id, a short-term, pleasure seeking monster that overrides the ego. It's the pleasure trap facing an unnatural environment. The issue isn’t id versus ego, or the horse versus the rider, as it’s often framed in psychology. It’s the abnormal (unnatural) hyper-stimulating environment.

There’s nothing wrong with your willpower. You have the right amount of nephrong cells in your kidney, the right amount of hairs in your nostr, and he right amount of willpower. The problem is that we have super-normal stimuli in our environment (think of moths to your porch light) for the last 10,000 years that's becoming more sophisticated, activating the pleasure centers of the brain and tilting the system out of balance, keeping us from thinking smart and long-term and from overriding our short-term impulses.

Blood Sugar Levels Affect Willpower; A Starchy Diet Is Essential

Professor Roy Baumeister of Florida State University, formerly Case Western, studied willpower in the late 1990s. He and his colleagues showed the singular role of blood sugar in willpower. The "power" in "willpower" is glucose! Willpower isn’t built up by having high stores of pleasure. The brain is 2% of your body weight but 20% of glucose use. The calories don’t have to taste good or taste pleasurable to get the willpower benefit.

1. Stress and decision-making weaken willpower (Freud called this "ego depletion", that the ego, when stressed, can’t override the "id." Baumeister’s work showed that Freud’s id/ego or horse/rider concept is inaccurate and showed that restored blood-sugar levels recover full "willpower."
—Example: Mardi-Gras Study. Mardi Gras is based on the belief that flooding the pleasure centers makes it easier for people to handle the deprivation of Lent. Study had 3 groups: those who got milkshakes, those who got milkshakes that tasted terrible; those who got a boring magazine to read. When stressed, only the boring magazine group responded poorly to stress. The terrible milkshake group did as well as the yummy milkshake group.

2. Stress also arises when we’re hungry or have to make lots of decisions.
—Example: Israeli Parole Board Study. The approval and disapproval of paroles spiked up and down from 70% to near 0% all day long, highest (approvals) after each meal or snack, and dropping as blood sugar dropped before the next meal or snack.

3. Stress causes blood sugar to drop in minutes, making us more impulsive and prone to give up faster. The hungrier we are, the more impulsive we are.
—Example: Lemonade Study. The sugar lemonade group handled stress well; the artificially sweetened lemonade group did poorly!

Doug Lisle’s House Rule: Argue only after eating.
Great Willpower Secrets

We don't need more willpower; we need to protect the willpower we have.

1. Clean your room, house, office, etc. A clean, clear environment minimizes brain stress.

2. Lay out exercise clothes but have all else in place to make it stand out, get your attention, and increase the likelihood of exercising. Exercise increases willpower. We don't know why, perhaps due to better blood sugar metabolism.

3. Always eat something healthful first and have healthful foods available. This action boosts your blood sugar to increase your impulse control and help you make a better decision about the unhealthful food available.

4. Put off the decision to eat unhealthy. "Maybe I'll have that cookie, maybe not. I'll decide later.

5. Get to bed on time. Sleep improves impulse control.

6. Make it an experiment. The mind avoids boxes and forever commitments, so don't set the bar too high and say "I'll never again eat "x." Instead, make it an experiment for 21 days or 6 months, saying "I'll try this and then reassess how it's going and what I want to do next." Boxes and vows put our reputation or character on the line if we can't live up to them. The time limit, whatever it is, means you don't have to face the same decision every day for 21 days or 6 months or whatever time frame you've chosen.

7. Don't set expectations too high. Don't say "I'll never fail or slip."

Weed Your Garden!

It's not a test of wills or battling a demon. It's weeds and weeding your garden. The solution is to routinely go out and weed. If you eat something unhealthy, the food has more potency for you, and a weed comes up in your garden. When you pull the weed by resisting for a few days, the image starts to decay. Those who weed routinely get better and better at it and have a garden in order that supports willpower.

The greatest Willpower Paradox is that those who seem to have the most willpower don't need to use it at all. They have the most orderly garden, making their environment more consistent with their natural history so that they aren't being challenged.

I'm never going to get there because I have an occasional temptation, but I can keep up with the weeds in my garden.

Q&A

Exercise: In a natural environment, humans have to exercise just to get food and water and keep away from predators. In our environment, we don't have to move much.

Q: A friend needs to change her diet and exercise but resists both.

A: Don't set the bar too high; he discusses this in his Continuum of Evil video. She's defending her status; it'll need to be her idea. She's locked in that battle. Your best attitude to support her would be "You'll get to it when the time is right for you."