

Use Your **Willpower Wisely**

New research shows that you have a finite store of this valuable **cognitive currency**, so spend it the smart way

BY NANCY KALISH ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALISON SEIFFER

EVER HEARD A DOUGHNUT CRY OUT YOUR NAME?

It happens to me every time I pass my neighborhood bakery and inhale that intoxicating, sugary smell. Most days, I'm able to resist. But sometimes, before I know it, I've broken one of my primary New Year's resolutions and stuffed two into my mouth. What happened to my willpower?

Many of us struggle with that vexing challenge—whether it's sticking to a new diet or resisting a shopping spree. Why is our self-control so strong on some days and so weak on others? Contrary to popular belief, willpower is not dependent on psychological strength alone. Physiological factors, such as blood sugar, brain chemistry, and hormones, also influence—and can undermine—our powers of self-restraint. The good news: “Once you understand the forces that weaken your self-control, you can do a lot to strengthen it,” says Kathleen D. Vohs, PhD, associate professor of consumer psychology at the Carlson School of Management in Minneapolis. Here's how to reinforce your willpower so it's ready when you need it.

BUDGET YOUR RESOLVE:

Each of us has a limited supply of self-control, which means if you try to exert it in too many areas at once, you'll rapidly deplete your reserve. A study from Case Western Reserve University illustrates the point. Researchers placed freshly baked chocolate chip cookies before two groups of participants, instructing one group to eat two or three and the other to eat radishes (while watching the others partake). Then everyone was asked to try to solve an impossible puzzle. Participants who had to resist the treats gave up on the problem twice as fast as those who were allowed to indulge. “Willpower is like gas in your car,” says Vohs. “When you resist something tempting, you use some up. The more you resist, the emptier your tank gets, until you run out of gas.”

TIP: Concentrate your willpower where you need it most. Don't try to cut down

on your computer chat time *and* lose weight at the same time. If you've spent the whole day fighting the urge to tell off a difficult colleague, don't go shopping after work. Vohs found that people were willing to purchase more when their willpower had been drained by a previous unrelated exercise in self-control.

KEEP BLOOD SUGAR

STEADY: Even a small blood-sugar dip, which occurs after you've skipped a meal, can impair the areas that oversee planning and self-restraint. Ironically, research shows that exerting your willpower decreases glucose even more. So if you skip lunch and spend the afternoon fighting the desire to dip into a coworker's candy jar, you could set yourself up for an evening binge.

TIP: Eat small meals that contain both complex carbohydrates and protein throughout the day (including breakfast). Keep protein-packed energy bars—with

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 **DON'T OVERDIET:** Eating too little not only depletes glucose, it also curtails the production of leptin, a hormone made by fat cells that helps regulate appetite. "Within a few days of starting to diet, your leptin levels can drop by half," explains Neal Barnard, MD, author of *Breaking the Food Seduction*. "Plummeting levels can increase appetite and bring on a binge."

TIP: Follow "the rule of 10": Multiply your target weight by 10, and never eat fewer calories than that daily total. And be sure to exercise 30 to 40 minutes each day. (A walk is fine.) Daily activity also maintains healthy levels of leptin, research shows.

 **DON'T SKIMP ON SLEEP:** Research shows that getting less than 6 hours of snooze time decreases decision-making abilities and leads to what Vohs calls "failures of self-control" as the day wears on. One mechanism in play: ghrelin, a hormone that triggers hunger. One study of healthy adults found that after they got 4 hours of sleep just 2 nights in a row, their levels of ghrelin increased by 28% and their appetites by a whopping 23%, especially for salty snacks and sweets.

TIP: Sleep between 7 and 8 hours each night. To get that amount, keep your room dark, quiet, and cool and develop a presleep ritual, such as a 10-minute meditation, to banish the day's stresses. ■