

THEY CANNOT GUARANTEE WHAT THEY PROMISE: SELF-CONTROL
STRATEGIES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PROACTIVITY FOR PERSONAL
SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF TEMPTATION

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ABSTRACT

The topics considered here are the importance of proactivity to successful self-control and self-control strategies. Most people, in an attempt to overcome temptation, consider and utilize a small percentage of the tools available to succeed with self-control endeavors. This literature review explores many of the processes related to self-control and the coordination of related strategies together. By understanding the factors, internally and externally, that influence and effect self-control struggles, individuals can assess their current standing and proficiency in goal setting and achievement to formulate a personal plan. Too many ‘self-help’ resources offer ‘cool sounding’ or ‘new’ ideas and options ‘to guaranteed to solve problems’ without taking into consideration the specific individual’s situation. Presented here is an adaptable set of tools to assist anyone attempting to improve their lives or the lives of those around them in order to increase and achieve life goals.

Keywords: self-control, goal setting, strategies, proactivity, deliberate practice

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Self-Control	1
General Definition	1
Executive Brain Function and Self-Control	4
Goal Setting	6
General Discussion	6
Hierarchical Goals.....	7
Three Strategies for Self-Control.....	9
General Definition	9
General Discussion	10
1. Individual Strategies for Self-Control	11
Personal Motivation	11
Personal Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities	12
2. Social Strategies for Self-Control.....	15
Social Motivation.....	15
Social Knowledge, Skills, and Ability.....	15
3. Structural Strategies for Self-Control	17
Structural Motivation	17
Structural Awareness	18
Proactivity	19
Definition.....	19
Conclusion	20

Introduction

Contemporary literature seeks to answer an age-old question, why are some people more successful than others? How is it that some people manage to achieve more success in their endeavors than others of who are similar in competences and/or skills? While there are certainly a plethora of factors influencing individual pursuits of success, the value of understanding self-control provides tools that can be modified and consistently used to enhance achievement. In order to explore these questions, this thesis analyzes and considers together self-control, the three strategies of self-control, the value of goal setting, and how proactivity ties them all together.

Self-Control

General Definition

As is the case with almost every term, there are multiple definitions available in the literature. Merriam-Webster defines self-control as “restraint exercised over one's own impulses, emotions, or desires.” This definition is the commonly accepted understanding of self-control; however, it limits the conversation by its narrow definition. The primary definition of self-control utilized here will be the one developed by Kentaro Fujita as— “the process of advancing abstract, distal motives over concrete, proximal motives in decision and action” (Fujita, 2011). The latter definition was constructed after evaluating current literature and establishes one of the most comprehensive analysis of why people achieve or undermine their objectives and goals. His definition also separates out one of the other main competing definitions for self-control, which is focused almost solely on willpower, the individual’s internal ability to continuously control their impulses directly related to temptations. Relying solely on willpower fails for one main reason. It is that

“self-control is achieved not through effortful impulse inhibition but rather through the regulation of one’s decision-making environment” (Fujita, 2011). The decision-making environment includes internal factors such as personal motivation and knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as external factors of social and structural constructs that either work for or against the current self-control struggle.

Ego depletion is the little-known (is this really little known or little understood?) problem of why a person’s willpower is a limited capacity. Baumeister and Heatherton (1996), after reviewing other research and conducting their own, concluded that “self-regulation appears to be a limited resource, which is renewable over time and can be increased or decreased as a result of gradual developments of practice. One cannot regulate everything at once.” This premise states that if people try to fight all the temptations that constantly bombards them all day through willpower alone, they will slowly lose the ability to overcome more powerful and proximal temptations. Much of this comes from the fact that the brain runs on glucose (Kahneman, D., 2011) and that executive functions associated with willpower burns through the sugar at a higher rate than other functions.

Unfortunately, the research conducted to arrive at this conclusion is currently been cast into question by other research that has showed that a self-fulfilling prophecy may actually be more concrete than actual ego depletion (Sripada, C., Kessler, D., & Jonides, J., 2016). Roy Baumeister has made claims that separate meta-analysis may have, due to the method used, affected something other than self-regulation and that further work need to be done (Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D., 2016). Scientific studies tend to publish positive results and may have been the reason that ego depletion gained such powerful momentum (Evan C, C., & Michael E, M., 2014). Control of oneself is a unique situation

with many unknowns, some even to the individual, newer research shows that emerging triumphant from the struggle relies more on the environment and how that fight is approached than sheer willpower alone.

Duckworth (2016) compares the earliest descriptions of self-control with a newer “widely” agreed upon definition of self-control as the individual’s difficulty of choice. A “self-initiated regulation of conflicting impulses in the service of” goals valued categorically greater than the alternatives (Baumeister, R. F., Heatherton, T. F., & Tice, D. M., 1994). Much of the early understandings of the struggle of self-control is focused on in-the-moment difficulties such as Plato’s analogy in *Pheadrus*:

The horse that is on the right, or nobler side, is upright in frame and well jointed, with a high neck and a regal nose; his coat is white, his eyes are black, and he is a lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory, he needs no whip, and is guided by verbal commands alone. The other horse is a crooked great jumble of limbs with a short bull-neck, a pug nose, black skin, and bloodshot white eyes; companion to wild boasts and indecency, he is shaggy around the ears—deaf as a post—and just barely yields to horsewhip and goad combined (370 BCE/1995, 246A–254A; as cited in Duckworth, A. L., Gendler, T. S., & Gross, J. J., 2016).

Many of the classic representations of the internal fight for control share the same theme of one path being correct and the other either dark or extremely regrettable. Such intense comparisons are rarely used in contemporary research; however, the imagery constructed by Plato is useful to illustrate the intense dichotomy of the black and white, success or failure viewpoints that many people hold during or after self-control attempts. Having

established a formal definition of self-control we will now explore what is happening within the brain and the outcomes and perceptions of attempted self-control measures.

Executive Brain Function and Self-Control

Executive functions (collectively referred to as cognitive control) are a set of cognitive processes – “including attentional control, inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, as well as reasoning, problem solving, and planning” – that are necessary for the cognitive control of behavior: selecting and successfully monitoring behaviors that facilitate the attainment of chosen goals (Chan, Touloupoulou, Chen, 2008; Diamond, 2013).

The prefrontal cortex (that section of the brain right behind the forehead) is the area that helps with things like decision-making and regulating behavior. Self-control, which is a form of regulation, and thus is executed in this part of the brain.

Success, or failure, of any self-control attempt must consider what is happening internally, either cognitively or subconsciously within the brain. As Adele Diamond puts it, “self-control is the aspect of inhibitory control that involves control over one’s behavior and control over one’s emotions in the service of controlling one’s behavior. Self-control is about resisting temptations and not acting impulsively.” Resistance can manifest itself in the refusal to engage in extramarital activities, overindulgence, or impulsively disregarding social and cultural norms (Diamond, A. 2013).

A current contentious debate in the study of executive functions is what component of an individual’s executive function a certain task demands. As with many fields and categories of psychology, definitive information is not at present available. Frequently

throughout history, assertions and promises related to complex brain functions are debunked and the lines are redrawn. Much of the contemporary psychological understanding partially due to the manner in which research is conducted and on specific participants. Laboratory guidelines and psychology participants frequently are students attending the college where the research is being conducted. This may not offer sufficient insight that can then be generalized to the general population. While there are competing and conflicting results and opinions on the psychological aspects of our minds, much of the brain's physical structure has been mapped out in an entirely different manner allowing us to avoid much of the bias and misrepresentation that occurs with self-report data. Accurate mapping data available in studies of the brain allows the more directed studies in other fields, such as psychology, while ensuring an adequate baseline of knowledge to launch additional research.

Stress, loneliness, a lack of sleep, sadness, or lack of physical fitness negatively impacts both the prefrontal cortex and our executive functions (Diamond, A. 2013). Achievement requiring mental activity relies on executive functions and therefore requires attention in maintaining a healthy mind. Early development of executive functions has been found to predict lifelong achievement in the areas of "health, wealth, and quality of life" (Diamond, A. 2013) and can be trained through repeated deliberate practice. Deliberate practice is most likely to result in success when used as a developmental tool (Ericsson, K. Anders, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Romer, 1993); however, the approach can differ in as many ways as there are to analyze and consider situations and experiences. The individual's choice to work to improve their executive functions is launching point for self-improvement and control of self. Personal choices based on past

experiences are one of the factors that make us unique as are the goals we choose to pursue throughout our lives.

Goal Setting

General Discussion

What is your goal? Do you have a goal? Do you understand the importance of goal setting?

Almost everyone begins any endeavor with some sort of idea as to how they will succeed. Goals differ among individuals and demonstrate their perceived value and importance for the task ahead. If a task has no perceived value, then you most likely will not put forth much effort toward achieving it; whereas, if the value is apparent, then a coordinated effort will be undertaken. There are several goal theories and several interpretations of those theories that explain the relationship between goals and achievement. One that aligns well with self-control and the later discussed strategies is achievement goal theory. Ames (1992) provides an academic example. He “posits that the purposes that students hold for engaging in a specific academic task (i.e., their achievement goals) are an important antecedent to their achievement-related processes and outcomes” (Liem, A. D., Lau, S., & Nie, Y. 2008). Within the goal setting literature there are many models and variants due to “contradictory findings in the empirical literature” (Daniels, L. M., Haynes, T. L., Stupnisky, R. H., Perry, R. P., Newall, N. E., & Pekrun, R., 2008). Despite the conflicting results, research consistently shows that motivation to achieve significant goal outcomes is important as it dictates differing levels of involvement in the entire process. The following section explores the definitions and applicable relevance of mastery and performance goals for self-control.

Mastery and performance based goals such as, (1) the mastery of a subject matter and (2) an enhancement of proficiencies and the ability to demonstrate individual competencies, helps to add tools to the all-too-common self-control struggle. Goals focused on mastery, “on their own or in combination [with performance goals], promote the most positive pattern of cognitive appraisals, emotions, and achievement,” while research alludes that “high levels of performance goals may be detrimental for certain outcomes even when combined with mastery goals” (Daniels, L. M., Haynes, T. L., Stupnisky, R. H., Perry, R. P., Newall, N. E., & Pekrun, R., 2008). Whether the goals are undertaken with either approach, both “can generate adaptive outcomes” and are therefore valuable as modifiable tools in the goal setting process (Liem, A. D., Lau, S., & Nie, Y., 2008).

Developing mastery goals is necessary but it is the motivation and value placed upon the achievement that determines the goal’s effectiveness. Understanding the ways in which one can pursue and develop interrelated goals in a hierarchical goal structure assists in attempting to begin the overwhelming task of strategically attacking self-control temptations.

Hierarchical Goals

Not only are the ways goals are considered important to their success, but the structure of the plan also plays a significant role in that potential to achieve success. Within the hierarchical goal framework, “self-control refers to the successful resolution of a conflict between two action impulses—one that corresponds to a goal that is more valued in the moment, and another that corresponds to a goal that is of a greater enduring value (Duckworth, A., & Gross, J., 2014). So, as perspectives or preferences change, new or altered goals, at any level, may appear and cause a rival goal to compete. The difference

maybe a new action that was not previously considered or new resources that allow for a new opportunistically valued goal to become viable and preferable to past plans. The model below a hierarchical goal framework that can be altered for any use. The higher order goals are illustrated at the top of the model using longer circles. Subordinate goals are smaller circles towards the bottom of the model.

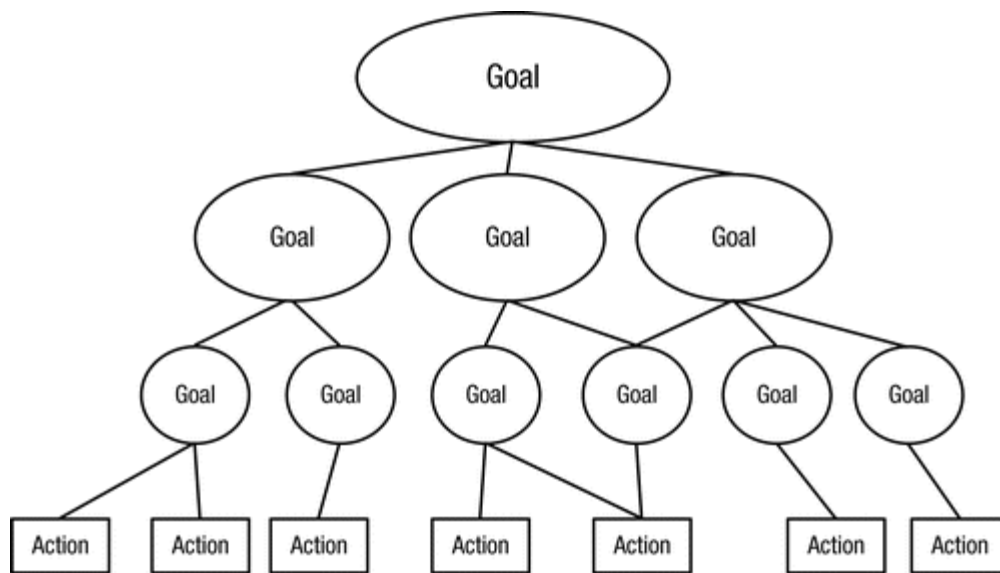


Fig. 1. Hierarchical goal framework. Goals are typically organized hierarchically, with fewer high-level goals and more numerous low-level goals; the latter are associated with action tendencies, here broadly construed to include attention, emotion, and behavior (Duckworth, A., & Gross, J. 2014).

The goal hierarchy that corresponds to an individual's chosen passion may require the suppression of rival higher valued or superordinate goals (a). When a particular lower-order goal or action is blocked, new goals or actions are generated and then pursued with vigor (b) (Duckworth, A., & Gross, J. 2014). As time passes, preferences and opinions shift, and completely change, making way for new goals and actionable paths to emerge

or compete. Reevaluating the changes in one's social environment along with perspective changes in the environment allows new goals to be pursued with the same or greater intensity than previously held goals.

Feedback is essential to develop effective structured goal strategies; the same concept applies to a structured goal implementation. Setbacks or failures will occur, it is impossible to avoid; however, it is through evaluation of these mistakes that details on how to improve goal setting strategies become available. The detail available from the feedback loop will be more valuable when used along with self-control strategies than when used alone.

Moments that are "crucial" or "at the most risk" of violating the predetermined course that is consistent with the "higher valued goals" are the moments ones needs to be most attentive to and design strategies to counter its influence (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D., 2011; Duckworth, A. L., Gendler, T. S., & Gross, J. J., 2016). Actively identifying those key moments allows the individual to understand their personal, social, and structural impending self-control strain and avoid relying unilaterally on willpower and focus instead on setting goals and developing failure avoidance and achievement strategies.

Three Strategies for Self-Control

General Definition

Merriam Webster define a strategy as "a careful plan or method: the art of devising or employing plans toward a goal". That is a very broad definition of the term but encompasses the nuance relevant to self-control strategies. Fujita's definition considers many of the internal factors and individual strategies necessary for self-control to be

effective while Duckworth's definition includes the short and long term external strategies required for successful self-control decisions and actions. Strategy as an "art" portrays the uniqueness required for individual success of self-control. Together these definitions give a substantial understanding of how one's self-control can be influenced, developed, and controlled. The use of a popular definition of strategy is helpful to understanding self-control strategies. This is because most people's understanding of the word or concept is derived from the primary definition from the dictionary.

Rather than examining the unique circumstances that lead to a loss of self-control, some individuals may select strategies that are new, attractive, or cool sounding. My approach focuses on the multitude of broad solutions without considering the specific and uniqueness of the individual and their situation. Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight, start a new habit, or overcome a bad one, understands how despite best efforts the goal is often not accomplished or does not develop as initially planned. Too often the attempt to overcome such obstacles ignores many of the influencers, either positive or negative, and available tools that are illusive yet imperative to the achieving or accomplishing goals.

General Discussion

"A careful plan" is essential to a successful utilization of strategy for self-control. If the answer to successful self-control could be found in any of the thousand self-help books that claim they have the answer, everyone would be a paragon of self-control and the conversation would have been rendered moot decades ago. Since we are not all in full control of ourselves at all times or when the stakes are high, we must consider the individual, social, and structural strategies and factors working for and against us.

1. Individual Strategies for Self-Control

Significant aspects of success or failure can be traced to the individual's personal motivation and abilities. While acknowledging that there are a myriad of forces acting against one's best interest as well as their degree of success, the individual does have significant control, with proper information, to alter and improve their situation and capabilities. Personal motivation hinges on the value placed on the overarching result or higher valued goals. "Sufficient motivation" is implied either directly or indirectly in every evaluation and discussion of personal motivation. The 'sufficient' amount depends on, as most things do, the person and the value placed on the result.

Personal Motivation

The personal motivation aspect of self-control includes considering what one's life will look like if they should continue to fail to overcome the short-term indulgences. Stephen Covey discusses something similar, a habit he refers to as 'beginning with the end in mind'. Self-reflection is a very powerful strategy to help establish a level of sufficient motivation. Without a goal in mind, especially the desired end outcome, one can and will experience difficulties maintaining self-control. By considering the path ahead necessary to reach the desired outcome, one can create concrete mental pictures of their goal and in doing so, improve the chances of success.

In the exercise of beginning with the end in mind, Covey begins by asking the reader to consider their own funeral at the end of their lives, very vividly and in significant detail. He includes that there will be four speakers; family members, friends, work or professional colleagues, and church or service members. The scenario then asks for the reader to consider what they would want each speaker to say about them and to use that

frame of reference to consider who they want to be and how that higher order goal can be achieved (Covey, pg. 103).

While Covey's exercise is an extreme example of how one can develop sufficient motivation, it does cover the main strategy for personal motivation. A smaller and shorter term can be used for the shorter and smaller subordinate goals. Vividly imagining the desired end and considering beforehand many, if not all, of the steps necessary to reach that end may seem too simple to work. However, it is one of the most reliable methods to align your cognitive functioning with the self-control and merely the first step and strategy to gaining and maintaining control over oneself and achieving higher order goals.

Personal Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Self-awareness knowledge, skills, and abilities, to at least some degree, is necessary for the next strategy. Specific knowledge is required for everything in life, whether it is operating a car or setting up a new computer. Knowing what will and will not work requires an assessment of your current knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the goal at hand. A nutritionist is not going to tell a client to "just eat healthy foods" because that ignores all the relevant information that the nutritionist is relying on to inform their decisions and recommendations. If you have ever tried to eat healthier without knowing anything about how certain foods impact your physical and mental state and just rely on cursory information, you know how doomed to failure such an approach can be.

Additionally, a cursory knowledge may lead one to believe the low fat or healthy packaging found at most grocery stores. Without a knowledge of nutrition, people may purchase one product over another believing it may be the healthier choice when it may

not be. The nutritionist would instead assess what is known and unknown and from there begin to fill in the blank with a detailed dietary plan. Ideally, this plan would contain the higher valued goal of general health with subordinate goals of eating healthier foods and exercising. Such lack of detailed knowledge and a general misunderstanding of complexity is one to the difficulty of self-control with a weakness the general application self-help books guaranteeing to be the solution to any problem or achievement of any goal.

After the assessment of knowledge of the requirements for goal achievement is complete, or at least underway, then we begin assessing the relevant skills and abilities needed to complete a plan. Willpower in the face of temptation can seem daunting, especially if facing powerful temptation and attempting to go it alone. Acquiring a coach or assistant who is aware of the internal struggle and willing to help can help to develop and improve skills such as willpower. This can be done by working to develop individual willpower by using coaching, predetermined responses to temptations, and incremental challenges. Urges, even powerful ones, usually subside over fifteen to twenty minutes (Schwartz, 2002). So a strategy that refocuses attention on the short term can be effective in staying on track and meeting long term goals.

Once one has identified their knowledge, skills, and abilities then an action plan can be devised to overcome areas that need to be developed. A useful action plan is breaking skills into small pieces and then practicing each in short intervals so that there is a full understanding of the areas that need improvement instead of going through the entirety of a skill development and getting input overall—immediate feedback against a clear standard to evaluate progress (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., &

Maxfield, D., 2011). Deliberately practicing these skills will help to improve the individual ability to overcome and combat self-control temptations; however, like everything in life, nothing goes exactly per plan. Practice in any field is necessary for improvement and development. The practice for this context is a specific one developed by K. Anders Ericsson:

People believe that because expert performance is qualitatively different from a normal performance the expert performer must be endowed with characteristics qualitatively different from those of normal adults. [...] We agree that expert performance is qualitatively different from normal performance and even that expert performers have characteristics and abilities that are qualitatively different from or at least outside the range of those of normal adults. However, we deny that these differences are immutable, that is, due to innate talent. Only a few exceptions, most notably height, are genetically prescribed. Instead, we argue that the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.

Deliberate practice consists of four basic requirements: A clearly defined stretch subordinate goal that narrowly focuses on a single aspect of the intended higher order level of expertise, full concentration and effort during the practice, immediate and informative feedback, and repetition and reflection and refinement (Ericsson, 2006).

All forms of deliberate practice involve measurable advancement of performance. This requires the capacity to sustain full concentration, a distraction-free environment, and access to the necessary training resources. Deliberate practice is limited for individuals who may not have access to these resources.

Ericsson's (1993) concept of practice was developed regarding the development of expert and exceptional performance; however its guidelines and lessons are adopted and considered here for individual improvement regardless if the ultimate goal is to become an expert in a specific domain.

2. Social Strategies for Self-Control

Social Motivation

Social interactions can be the reason for the self-control failure or success. Throughout the course of a day, week, or month there are individuals who influence others for better or worse. The first step in developing a social motivation strategy is to identify those who are helping or hindering attempts at self-control (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D., 2011). Identifying those around you and what category they fit into helps to clarify what social influencers are at play. Once identified, the hinderers can either be confronted and asked to switch to a helping role, or at least not continue to be a negative impact or that relationship may need to be reevaluated. There is no implication here that anyone who may not be helping is not worth being in your life, that will only lead to loss and a myriad of negative emotions that may adversely affect self-control. However, if after being informed of the impact individuals are choosing to maintain the position of the opposition instead of a helper, then as a last alternative, distance may need to be established. On the other hand, if they choose to shift to being a supporter then you can enlist them in helping.

Social Knowledge, Skills, and Ability

Now aware of the social motivation of oneself and those in the surrounding environment, social ability can now be utilized. As is the case with personal motivation, the social

ability requires self-awareness. Self-awareness takes the form of analyzing your situation and experience in relation to those around you. Some individuals in the surrounding environment who recommend or give advice contrary to your best interest and obstruct rather than assist you; it is important to be able to identify these social forces. Self-serving biases can explain why you might believe that you know more than you actually do and because of these biases, gaps in knowledge are often invisible to us. Irrelevant to the relationship, these individuals may not be aware of their effect, negatively impacting self-control strategies. Utilization of self-awareness and the ability to alter social experiences provides a positive course of action to pivot these interactions in a more positive direction.

To identify our position within the social environment we begin with an analysis of the state of the situation. Frequently, after a significant amount of time has passed while trying to overcome loss of self-control, what is perceived as normal and acceptable has shifted out of awareness. Redefining what is normal (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D., 2011) and acceptable in that instance establishes the difference between where one started, one's ultimate goals, benchmarks, and the current reality. Sometimes certain aspects of ourselves and our reality become so commonplace that small incremental changes over time redefine normalcy within ourselves and our environment impacting our ability to accurately assess our social environment. Once the gap between where we really are and our perceived progress has been identified, the steps needed to minimize or close the gap can be developed and implemented. Evaluating oneself with as much objectivity one can manage illuminates the individual's task regarding others.

3. Structural Strategies for Self-Control

Structural Motivation

A common recommendation for those seeking a healthier and fitter body will include, among others, that they publicly advertise their plans to friends, family, even co-workers thus creating structure within which to attempt goal achievement. This is done in an attempt to add a strategy of peer pressure, accountability, and rewards in order to increase goal achievement. Those who choose to participate in someone else's journey and, should they succeed, manage to participate in their future success.

Incentives, whether it be peer pressure or a treat, must be consistent with the goal. One who wishes to lose weight does not, at least with any level of success, reward themselves with a chocolate cake for taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Due to the lack of adequate goal setting individuals may reward themselves with the closest or easiest proximal reward, irrelevant to goal achievement. Large incentives rarely result in substantial change; it actually ends leading to the initial activity or practice to be reverted to after the large reward is no longer present (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D., 2011).

Rewards need to be small and simple as well as linked directly to the desired behavior.

Incentivizing results, which are often out of the individual's control, ignores focusing on the behavior. The behavior is the focus and the controllable, as such should be where the small and incremental rewards play a role to improve, develop, maintain motivation, and achieve goals.

Structural Awareness

One's intentionality identifies and defines normalcy, but it also allows an awareness of the default path life inevitably takes. A discussion about, or with someone, who has been following the same consistent lifestyle patterns for decades, often experiences some significant life-altering event and only at that time realizes how quickly decades seem to have passed.

These default activities, irrelevant to the period they occupy, can wreak havoc on self-control and goal achievement since we eventually lose conscious awareness of our action as they become automatic. The realization that a damaging habit has been developed and become automatic can be alarming once identified. However, barriers can be put in place to negate or redirect some of these automatic actions such as; eating due to boredom, ordering an extremely high calorie coffee drink because you "need" the caffeine, or because your co-workers all do, or even the utilization of mind altering substances after a full day because it used to be a bonding experience and was not eliminated when those individuals left the scene. Each situation and difficulty is different and therefore requires a separate plan of action each with subordinate, short term goals and on overarching higher value goals. While an effective structural strategy and tool, default activities barriers can, if relied solely upon, lead to failure once the setting changes and the barriers are no longer in place (McMillan, R., Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & Maxfield, D., 2011). An effective structural strategy is to reverse engineer the automatic and establish positive autopilot activities.

To successfully overcome a self-control difficulties a myriad of strategies and tools should be used. These include an understanding of the relevant executive functions, the

hierarchical goal structure, personal and social motivation, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and structural motivation and awareness. However, there is one piece remaining, proactivity which will be explored in the next section.

Proactivity

Definition

A proactive individual “is someone who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces and who” shapes their environment by scanning for opportunities, taking action, and persevering until closure has been reached (Kirby, E., Kirby, S., & Lewis, M., 2002). Reactive and passive individuals are on the opposite side of the spectrum in regards to how they affect their “circle of influence” (Covey, 2014). Stephen R. Covey describes each person’s “circle of influence” as:

Another excellent way to become more self-aware regarding our own degree of proactivity is to look at where we focus our time and energy. We each have a wide range of concerns—our health, our children, problems at work, the national debt, nuclear war. We could separate those from things in which we have no particular mental or emotional involvement...[that involves] the problems we face [falling into] one of three areas: direct control (problems involving our own behavior); indirect control (problems involving other people’s behavior); or no control (problems we can do nothing about, such as our past or situational realities).

Being proactive means taking “response-ability” (Covey, 2014). Proactive individuals take responsibility for their actions within their environment. They do not allow

environmental factors such as poor weather or traffic on the way to work to have any bearing or control over their mood or interactions throughout the day.

Initiative allows one to take responsibility for themselves and their reactions to circumstances, feelings, and lifetime conditioning. They elect to follow the “freedom of choice between stimulus and their response” (Covey, 2014). External stimuli impacts everyone, whether social, physical, or psychological; however, it is proactivity that allows the subordination of an impulse to align with that individual’s core values instead of merely reacting to everything and letting the external environment dictate responses.

Proactivity requires more self-awareness and attunement with oneself than the previously mentioned three strategies. As was the case with ego depletion and the amount available for use throughout a day, proactivity is not considered a “stable dispositional trait” therefore, individuals and benefit from deliberate practice in an effort to increase proactivity (Kirby, E., Kirby, S., & Lewis, M., 2002).

Conclusion

Far too often the “solutions” given to increase success via self-control are designed for specific people in specific situations. Fortunately, humans are phenomenally unique, so the odds of a one size fits all approach to someone’s self-control difficulties are not likely to exist. Instead, beginning with a clear definition of the concepts of knowledge and understanding, self-control and goal achievement allows the individual to begin one of the first steps to combat temptations. Taking a page from general scientific inquiry related to self-awareness and social knowledge, skills, and abilities, beginning with ‘I don’t know’ will allow for a more objective evaluation of one’s current level of performance and closeness to goal achievement.

Once a baseline understanding has been established, adding related and relative components becomes simpler and flows from each concept to the next. Beginning with the executive functions, we add goal setting structures and strategies and their importance towards an all-around self-control theory that helps us overcome shortcomings and difficulties. These include identifying the initial actions necessary to tackle and overcome each goal. During this early and setup stage, nothing is set in stone and is subject to alterations as is necessary.

The first strategies for self-control begin with an internal evaluation. Taking into account self-serving biases, one must be honest about their current abilities and motivation for the task ahead. Asking oneself such introspective questions and recording the answers before temptation can rear its ugly head, can avoid personal failures in those crucial moments.

Deliberately practicing some of situations expected and keeping in mind that failure will occur can increase chances of success. The second set of strategies must include social considerations. Not everyone will cooperate or have your best interest at heart.

Identifying those people and having a conversation about their past, present, and future participation in your goal achievement endeavors or lack thereof will increase trust and possibly add some allies to your side. Motivation through external rewards can greatly improve success by incentivizing proper goal setting behaviors. Unfortunately, when people don't plan properly it leads to grabbing close and easy rewards that may be counterproductive with the achievement of higher order goals. The final strategy requires that self-awareness about default activities. An example of this is if you have ever noticed picking up or looking at your phone or glancing at the corner of your screen where email

summaries pop up. Default activities benefit from using some or all the prior strategies and will require a specific plan of action to combat.

From my experience, “take initiative” is an age-old adage that is frequently overheard within the United States Army. The sentiment is usually intended to foster some form of proactivity. This simple and innocuous sounding phrase is usually one of the first things a new soldier hears, either in basic training or upon initial interactions with a new unit. Too afraid to make mistakes, some will stumble around until someone points them in the right direction or they finally tire of doing pushups and go and find the answers for themselves. Not everyone has such prescribed motivation or conditioning. However, everyone can benefit from the relevant executive functions, the hierarchical goal structure, personal and social motivation, knowledge, skills, and abilities, structural motivation and awareness, and being proactive in every domain of life.

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