

How to Hold On to Your Willpower

Raise your hand if you've ever started a "life-changing," "I'm really gonna do this" diet, only to maintain it for a day or two. Now raise the other hand if you've ever joined a gym in January but by February, you were back to your old habits.

I could go on, but I don't want your arms to get tired! Kidding aside, the truth is that we *all* struggle with self-discipline and have felt our willpower wane numerous times in our lives; no matter how motivated we feel initially, we often stumble and regress, discouraging ourselves from ever trying again. We look at the five-days-a-week gymgoers and the green-smoothie-sipping health nuts with admiration and wonder if we could ever be as diligent and disciplined as they are. Well, I have good news: We can be!

In 2009, a graduate student by the name of Fred Stutzman was sitting at his favorite coffee shop working on his thesis when he noticed the establishment had acquired wireless Internet. Now, despite his best intentions to focus and stay on track, he found himself battling the constant temptation to go online—and *not* for the purpose of conducting scholarly research.

Fortunately, Stutzman happened to be a programmer studying information science and decided to make lemonade out of this productivity-stifling lemon. He went home and developed a software program called Freedom. The application, which has since been praised by publications such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Economist*, is simple and straightforward: You turn it on, tell it how long you want to work, and then it prevents you from going online until the work period ends. If you want to return online before time is up, your computer will reboot—and who has time for that?

So how can Mr. Stutzman's clever invention help you and me stick to our health goals? Because it proves just how effective self-prescribed constraints can be.

In the field of psychology, the term *decision fatigue* refers to the deteriorating quality of our decisions after we've spent a fair amount of time making them. Take, for instance, the candy bars, sodas and tabloids awaiting you at the checkout line in the grocery store; you've likely finished making wise choices in the frozen food aisle and produce section, but now there's a Snickers bar at arm's reach that is far too irresistible to pass up.

This is a classic example of decision fatigue, and it affects us in multiple areas of our lives, including our exercise routines and nutrition plans.

Stutzman's Freedom app eliminates users' options, thereby making it much easier to stay on task. The constraint placed on users' behavior paradoxically frees them to be more productive than those whose social media is just a click away.

A CrossFit athlete I train has had tremendous success following a diet program that, for 30 days, restricts participants' food options drastically. She told me that she "does the best when [her] options are limited" and is going to continue to abide by much of the program's "rules."

Another woman I know needed to lose over 300 pounds and hadn't exercised a day in her life. She started on Day 1 by walking from her house to her mailbox and back. The next day, she went to the second mailbox and back. She never added more than one mailbox but took every day one mailbox at a time. Small steps like this have helped her shed over 200 pounds thus far.

We often make excuses for our unhealthy behaviors; we say we don't know enough about nutrition or working out, or that we've tried and failed too many times. But what would happen if we limited our options? What would happen if we put a

fitness constraint on ourselves that only enabled us to work out for five minutes a day for the first 10 days?

What would happen if we put a healthy eating constraint on ourselves that only allowed us to eat the same kind of vegetable every day for a week?

It's difficult to feel overwhelmed when your options are limited, and it's satisfying to learn that, yes, you can maintain a healthy habit and progress toward your goal, one step at a time. It's the small successes that will ultimately lead to our greatest victories.

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