



The secret to self-regulation

Research shows that people who are effective at achieving their goals don't rely on willpower to resist temptations. They are better at self-regulation. Here, you'll discover the secret to lasting behaviour change.

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Have you ever joined a gym or planned to start a new fitness program, but struggled to get out of bed on Monday morning when the alarm went off? Then you spent the rest of the day berating yourself and ended up engaging in unhealthy behaviour because of the guilt and self-criticism?

Or do you tackle new goals with bucketloads of enthusiasm, but after a few weeks the initial excitement wears off and you find it difficult to maintain your motivation? Have you ever wished that you just had more willpower?

Research shows that people who are effective at achieving their goals don't rely on willpower to resist temptations. They are better at self-regulation than people who struggle to stay motivated.

What does self-regulation entail?

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your thoughts and emotions in the pursuit of long-term goals. It also refers to how well you regulate your nervous system and bring yourself back into a state of balance when your stress response is triggered. The ability to self-regulate results in fewer disruptive thoughts and negative behaviours and less cognitive conflict. Cognitive conflict refers to negative self-talk and wrestling with self-control.

Having both the desire and motivation to change is essential for the change to be lasting. Your level of self-awareness is a contributing factor, and your social networks may play a role in influencing the outcome. Many people who have the "desire to change" but fall short in some of the other areas. This explains why self-regulation is so important.

How do you self-regulate?

You've no doubt heard of the infamous 1960s marshmallow study. The children who participated were told that if they could hold off eating a marshmallow for 15 minutes, they would receive two. Researchers then tracked how the four-year-olds fared later in life and concluded that the ability to delay gratification had a significant influence on adolescent achievement.

The study was revisited in 2018 with a much larger sample size and more stringent research measures. Results demonstrated that the capacity to hold out for a second marshmallow was significantly influenced by the child's social and economic background. In essence, the ability to resist temptation is influenced by a range of factors and delayed gratification skills can be learned.

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A little bit of neuroscience

The prefrontal cortex is the part of your brain that's responsible for your ability to plan and think about the consequences of your actions, solve problems and control impulses. The prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed until your mid-20s. Just as they can find it hard to resist a marshmallow, children and teenagers can find it hard to self-regulate. They rely on the amygdala (the brain's threat radar) to make decisions and solve problems in emotionally charged situations.

As an adult, when your nervous system is triggered by stress (a very common occurrence in our modern, overscheduled world) the amygdala is activated, which shuts down the neural pathway to your prefrontal cortex. As a result, you can make poor, impulsive decisions. Hence, self-regulation is extremely important.

According to psychologist Dr Iris Pachler, it's important to learn how to tap into the parasympathetic nervous system to restore a sense of calm and be better able to make balanced and sensible decisions. A stressed or overwhelmed person is often disconnected from their body and unaware of their habitual behaviour. Greater self-awareness can assist you to recognise when you are moving through life on autopilot.

"Understanding one's patterns, tendencies and the sentiments that do not serve you can greatly help a person to make changes on a deep level. When you make a fierce commitment to giving yourself the time, attention and tools to regulate your system, you can achieve powerful shifts to respond, rather than react," says Palcher.

We should also take steps to better understand ourselves. "Then you can build a sense of pride, authenticity and trust in self, which of course will improve your relationship with yourself and with others," says Pachler.

How to regulate your nervous system

The first step in regulating your nervous system is to take care of your physical and emotional wellbeing. Move your body daily, eat nutrient-dense foods and get the recommended seven to nine hours sleep. Don't underestimate the importance of these basic health foundations and the

significant difference they can make to your life. A person who is sleep-deprived and nutrient-deficient will often have a more heightened reaction to stress than a person who is well rested and well nourished.

On occasions when your stress response is triggered, there are several ways you can activate the parasympathetic nervous system to move your body out of the fight or flight once the threat is over. These include breathwork, relaxation exercises and meditation. These practices elicit a relaxation response and reduce the secretion of stress hormones. Mindfulness meditation encourages you to focus on your breath instead of getting caught up in negative emotions or being carried away by catastrophic thinking. Deep belly breathing increases the amount of oxygen that enters your body and reduces your heart rate. These practices are extremely important for the level of self-regulation that is required to achieve long-term goals.

Working with a registered psychologist or mental health practitioner can help you to understand the unconscious triggers that move your body into a fight or flight state. Palcher recommends seeking professional support for unresolved trauma, unhealed mental health challenges or deeply ingrained patterns that feel too overwhelming to tackle alone.

Attentional training

Attentional training refers to the ability to resist temptation in favour of long-term goals and has been suggested to be a form of cognitive control. It involves training and redirecting attentional focus or altering the cognitive representation of the object of temptation, for example, distracting yourself so you are no longer focusing on the temptation or reframing the situation away from the appealing features of the tempting object toward "cooler" representations. If we use the marshmallow example again, by distracting yourself with another task instead of looking at the marshmallow or focusing on non-consummatory qualities such as its shape, it may be easier to resist.

Attentional training can be achieved through the practice of mindfulness meditation. It can also be practised when carrying out mundane tasks. During mindfulness meditation, your breath is the focus of your attention. Each time your

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mind wanders, you gently direct your focus back to the breath. With mundane task focusing, the goal is to gradually practise sustaining your attention on a mundane activity. Engaging in both these practices on a regular basis will give your attention a good workout. Over time you will find you can focus for longer periods, and are less distracted and more self-aware.

The steps to lasting change

At a practical level, achieving lasting change requires planning, monitoring, self-reflection and self-compassion. When it comes to planning, it's important to take a holistic approach. Do you have the right social support? Does your external environment need to be modified to maintain the behaviour? Will you need further training in a particular skill area when your progress plateaus and you subsequently start to lose motivation? How will you stay committed during more challenging times and how will you pick yourself up and keep going if you make a mistake? Spend time considering these factors and put plans in place to deal with challenges when they arise. The following steps will also help.

Adjust your mindset

Your attitude towards change plays an important role. It's hard to stay committed to anything challenging if you are not connected to the motivation behind why you are doing it! The best way to achieve this is by having a deep understanding of what you will gain from making this change stick. How will your life change? What are the benefits?

The stronger your intention, the more likely it is that change will occur. Strengthen your attitude by aligning your goals to your core values and focusing on the benefits. Visualise what your life will be like once the change has taken

place. Picture your future self enjoying the rewards and benefits the change will bring.

Remove barriers to change

Behaviour change is difficult to initiate and even more difficult to maintain so it's important to consider any barriers that might stand in your way. By learning your procrastination triggers, removing distractions and modifying your physical environment, you are essentially setting yourself up for success. Take some time to consider draining tasks and mindless behaviours that take up precious time but don't get you any closer to your goals. Remove temptations from your environment where possible and ensure you have the necessary equipment you need to make progress.

Build new habits

Building and maintaining new habits is a key factor in lasting behaviour change. Habitual behaviour is automatically triggered in response to certain cues. You are often not aware, or in control of, your reaction. For example, you may have a daily habit of eating chocolate on the couch after dinner while watching Netflix. The next time you sit on the couch and turn on Netflix you will no doubt find yourself reaching for the chocolate block. Your action has been triggered by an unconscious habitual process.

How does one change such ingrained behaviours? Once again, it's important to be self-aware. Don't allow yourself to move through your day on autopilot. Spend time reflecting on your current habitual behaviours and what triggers them. Then interrupt triggers by changing your routine. For example, read a book or take a bath instead of watching Netflix.

To replace old, maladaptive habits with new, healthy ones, you need to be intentional. Establishing new, unfamiliar behaviour requires conscious processing.

If you want to continue watching Netflix in the evening on a regular basis, it can be helpful to find something to replace the chocolate. Consider a delicious herbal tea. Make brewing the tea part of your evening ritual and something you look forward to. You build a habit by starting something new and then repeating that action daily, until it becomes part of your routine.

Seek positive social support

Countless social research studies show that the people you surround yourself with influence your behaviour and this can extend to your health and wellbeing. It's therefore important to surround yourself with the right people — people who not only support you with your goals but who cheer you along. Even better, they squat, lift and meal prep along with you because they are also committed to goal achievement and healthy behaviour change.

Give yourself permission to fail

It's important to recognise that the space between your comfort zone and failure is the space where the greatest growth occurs. This is why change can be hard and it's also the reason why setbacks are a natural part of the process. The way you handle setbacks has a significant influence on whether or not you achieve your goals. It's important to dust yourself off and continue to move forward, even on the days when you feel like you've failed. By giving yourself permission to make mistakes, you have a greater chance at growth and subsequently, a greater chance at change.

People who self-regulate naturally set themselves up for success. They have healthy self-beliefs; a set of daily habits and they understand their "why". That is, they are connected to their core values and know why they want to achieve a certain goal. As a result, they focus on goals that are realistic and authentic. They surround themselves with supportive people, which helps them to manage their stress and persist through the challenging times. Importantly, they practise self-compassion when they make mistakes or fail at a particular task.

Behaviour change starts with awareness and requires patience, persistence and hard work. By supporting your nervous system and taking the steps outlined above, you have a much greater chance of achieving your goals — even the hairy, audacious ones! Just be sure to prioritise your wellbeing at the same time. Growth should never equal burnout. 🌱

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