Everyday Temptations: an Experience Sampling Study on How People Control Their Desires

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We present results from an experience sampling study (N=205) involving more than 7,000 reported desire episodes. It is shown how the control of everyday desires is influenced by situational factors such as alcohol, ego depletion, and the presence of other people, and how self-conscious emotions shape subsequent self-control.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent years, research on human self-control has flourished. Self-control can be defined as the ability to override or change one’s inner responses, as well as to interrupt undesired behavioral tendencies (such as impulses) and refrain from acting on them. However, most research has been conducted in laboratory settings even though suitable methods such as the daily construction method and experience sampling have been proposed. Given the paucity of knowledge of how people control their desires in naturalistic settings, our study sought to provide an in-depth analysis of everyday self-control through the use of experience sampling methodology. Specifically, we were driven by the following main questions: What kind of urges and desires do people experience over the course of their daily lives? To what extent do desires conflict with important long-term goals, and how often and how successfully do people resist them? Further, to what extent do people’s successes and failures trigger self-conscious emotions such as guilt, pride, and regret? And do these self-conscious emotions in response to lapses aid subsequent self-control as predicted by feedback models or hinder subsequent self-control as suggested by findings on the spiraling effects of emotional distress?

To study desire and self-control in vivo, we conducted an experience sampling study on a heterogeneous sample of 205 adults in Western Europe. Participants were prompted at random with 7 signals per day over the course of a week. They indicated if they had current or recent desires and, specified the content of the desire from a list of 15 main and more than 70 subcategories. Moreover, participants provided information on the details and their possible self-control attempts: how strongly the desire was experienced, whether the desire conflicted with an important goal, whether and how they tried to resist the desire, whether they executed the desire-relevant behavior or not. In addition, participants reported their current levels of guilt, regret, and pride and reported on various circumstantial variables such as level of alcohol intoxication.

Participants reported more than 7,000 desire episodes (75% of all occasions that they were beeped). Approximately one-third of desires conflicted moderately to highly with other goals. Multilevel analyses showed that degree of conflict predicted the likelihood with which participants attempted to resist the present desire, and that resistance had a strong negative effect on enactment. Specifically, 83% of all resistance attempts were successful, leaving a nontrivial amount (17%) of self-control failures among resisted desires. Desire strength, desire-goal conflict, and successful resistance varied across domains, with sexual desires, spending impulses, and sports inclinations most likely to be successfully resisted, and desires for media use and work least likely to be successfully resisted. Self-control success was further moderated by situational factors such as alcohol consumption, ego depletion due to previous resistance attempts on the same day, and whether other people in the immediate environment already engaged in the desire-related behavior of interest.

Regarding self-conscious emotions, as expected, guilt experiences were strongest when desires were resisted but enacted (i.e., self-control failure) and pride experiences were strongest when desires were resisted and not enacted (i.e., self-control success). Feelings of regret, in contrast, were most pronounced when unproblematic (i.e., unresolved) desires were not enacted. To address the question of how previous self-conscious emotions may aid or hinder subsequent self-control, we regressed each person’s conflict, resistance, and enactment reports on his or her previous feelings of guilt, regret, and pride within the same specific type of desire (e.g., sweets, beer, watching TV) and included as a moderator whether the preceding occasion counted as a lapse or not (in the case of guilt and regret), or as self-control success (in the case of pride). We found that the intensity of guilt reactions to lapses had an indirect effect on subsequent enactment via increased feelings of conflict, and a greater likelihood of resisting the problematic desire. For regret, there was only an indirect effect on subsequent conflict experiences. Pride emerged as the most potent self-conscious emotion in that pride in response to self-control failure predicted less subsequent enactment. As in the case of guilt, this effect was mediated via increased conflict experiences and a greater likelihood of resistance.

In sum, these data provide rich insights into people’s regular struggles and successes in overcoming temptation. Moreover, we suggest mechanisms (increasing experience of conflict, increased resistance) by which self-conscious emotions may aid subsequent self-control.