Do I Get Stronger When I Stop to Eat My Spinach? the Impact of Planned Breaks on Self-Regulation

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The present research proposes that it is beneficial to include planned breaks on the quest of consecutive self-regulatory tasks. Results from two experiments show that the inclusion of breaks leads to less strain on self-regulatory resources than no-break processes, contributing to higher likelihood of proceeding with self-regulatory tasks.

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The Impact of Planned Breaks on Self-Regulation

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research has outlined the importance of planned deviations on goal-pursuit (Coelho do Vale, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2016). However, no specific research has focused specifically in understanding the impact of planned breaks on consumers' self-regulatory ability. That is the aim of the present research.

Previous research has highlighted that although individuals acknowledge the importance of engaging in virtuous behavior, they often find it difficult to do so (Ein-Gar 2015). The reason for this is typically related with people's inability to self-regulate themselves, with individuals being more likely to succumb to various flawed decision strategies when lacking self-regulatory resources (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, and Vohs, 2008). In the dieting domain, for example, it has been shown that although dieters can resist temptations in the short term, they tend to fail on subsequent tasks of resisting to temptations, because of the reduced resources that are available for self-regulation (Vohs and Heatherton 2000). In line with this, Wansink and Chandon (2014) highlighted the need to help consumers develop strategies to persist in their dieting quests. Moreover, it has also been shown that several factors can influence consumers’ ability to be able or not to self-regulate behavior. For example, recent work from Job and colleagues (2015) suggests that individuals who believe that willpower is an abundant resource tend to exhibit better self-control after demanding tasks. Other work from Salerno and colleagues (2015) indicated that for consumers with self-regulatory goals the feeling of pride experienced after self-regulatory accomplishment can discourage their engagement in further self-regulatory tasks, licensing them to indulge. Also Walsh (2014) showed a boundary effect of self-control, but this time with findings suggesting that goal priming can attenuate the depletion effect on a subsequent self-control task.

Despite all these previous studies, more research needs to be conducted to offer consumers strategies they can implement to better exert self-regulation and attain their goals. For example, findings from Campbell and Warren (2015) stress the importance of goal monitoring, since consumers tend to exhibit a progress bias in goal-pursuit, with expectations of goal attainment moderating the progress bias.

The present research builds on the idea that when consumers exert effort in engaging in virtuous behavior, self-regulatory resources become depleted, decreasing the ability to proceed with further self-regulatory activities (Baumeister 2002; Muraven and Baumeister, 2000; Schmeichel and Baumeister 2004). Relaxation or deviation from virtuous activities may then be needed in order to allow the replenishment of self-regulatory resources and to allow individuals to proceed with self-regulatory activities. For example, Gailliot and colleagues (2007) findings revealed that the exertion of self-control in tasks of varied nature reduced blood glucose levels and that restoring the level of glucose to a sufficient level typically improves self-control (Gailliot and Baumeister, 2007). We propose then that deviations from virtuous or goal-consistent behaviors, because of the potential hedonic valence of these activities, may help consumers’ regain self-regulatory resources, allowing them to persist in further self-regulatory tasks.

We claim however that it is crucial that these deviations are planned because unplanned deviations might easily be interpreted as failures and might lead to a “what-the-hell” effect (Cochran and Tesser, 1996) with self-regulatory behaviors being interrupted. Therefore, in a similar vein to Popeye, we propose that to plan in advance to stop once in a while to “eat my spinach” may be helpful, making consumers stronger to continue with their self-regulatory quests. Findings from two experimental studies support this idea revealing that breaks can be a powerful strategy to increase consumers’ ability to proceed with further self-regulatory tasks.

In study 1, we tested our predictions using an objective behavioral measure of self-control to assess self-regulatory ability effects of planned goal deviations. We used the maximum amount of time that participants can squeeze a handgrip, building on prior depletion research (Muraven et al., 1998). In study 2, using a similar procedure to the previous study in which participants were asked to list their thoughts while avoiding to think on a white bear, we assessed consumers’ reported self-regulatory resources. Both studies were computer-based (Authorware 6.0, Macromedia Inc. 2001).

Importantly, the fact that self-regulatory tasks were performed just for a few minutes in both experiments and that even so we found significant effects rules out the possibility that our findings could have been explained by simple fatigue. It is striking that mental thought control task exerted for a just brief period of time interferes with participants’ ability to perform a physical task—the self-regulatory measure. The consistency of findings across the experiments indicates that indeed the inclusion of self-regulatory breaks leads to less strain on self-regulatory resources than no-break processes, thus contributing to higher likelihood of proceeding with self-regulatory tasks. The two experiments underline the importance that self-regulatory misaligned activities are planned and incorporated a priori in the self-regulatory process.

This finding supports our prediction that prior knowledge of the possibility of engaging in self-regulatory breaks increases the ability to proceed with further self-regulatory tasks. Participants in the planned break group showed higher self-regulatory ability than participants that performed exactly the same task sequence but did not know in advance the possibility of engaging in the self-regulatory break during which they could engage in tasks of different nature.

Our results demonstrate that when consumers incorporate in their self-regulatory pursuits the possibility of engaging in planned-misaligned activities this enhances their self-regulatory ability, which may also enhance their likelihood of long-term goal attainment. This is new, and it points to the importance of flexibility in tasks that involve the continuous exertion of self-regulation. Unplanned misaligned activities (the “breaks”) may feel as failures and thus set a “failure cascade” in motion, with a “what the hell” effect as result, such that self-regulatory tasks are completely abandoned. Our results suggest that quite the contrary happens when breaks are planned, strengthening self-regulation and showing that indeed it may be a good strategy to stop and eat spinachs along the self-regulatory quest.

REFERENCES
