When Having a Trick Up Your Sleeve Is a Bad Thing: Highly Effective Self-Control Strategies Can Be Demotivating

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We propose that highly effective self-control strategies can backfire, particularly for individuals low in trait self-control who are, ironically, most in need of help. Evidence from four experiments reveals that a more (vs. less) effective strategy reduces self-control among individuals low in trait self-control by lowering anticipated guilt.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers differ in their dispositional capacity to exercise self-control. Compared to those high in trait self-control, individuals low in trait self-control are more likely to place themselves in a temptation-rich environment (Ent, Baumeister, and Tice 2015; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, and Vohs 2012) and to act on impulses triggered by temptations (Baumeister and Heatherton 1996). As a result, low self-control is associated with numerous personal and societal problems, such as binge eating, substance abuse, aggression and crime, weak academic performance, poor psychological adjustment, and poor interpersonal relationships (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1994; DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, and Gailliot 2007; Duckworth and Seligman 2005; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Shoda, Mischel, and Peake 1990; Tangney, Baumeister, Boone 2004; Wiebe 2006). Due to their chronic vulnerability to self-control failures, it is crucial to inform consumers low in trait self-control about effective strategies for resisting temptations. As such, companies often seek to convince consumers of the effectiveness of products that serve as strategies to facilitate self-control, ranging from debt consolidation programs to smartphone applications like MyFitnessPal.

Although perceived strategy effectiveness can stimulate preferences and purchases (Chae, Li, and Zhu 2013; Sheth and Talarzyk 1972), it remains less clear how perceived strategy effectiveness might affect consumer self-control. Intuitively, greater perceived strategy effectiveness should boost self-regulatory strength of those low in trait self-control. However, building on prior research on justification-based self-control failure (De Witt Huberts, Evers, and De Ridder 2014; Khan and Dhar 2007), we propose that greater perceived strategy effectiveness can ironically undermine the motivation to exercise self-control among those low in trait self-control who are, ironically, most in need of help, because greater perceived strategy effectiveness reduces anticipated guilt associated with indulgence, thereby increasing their susceptibility to temptations. We conducted four studies to test this theoretical framework.

Evidence from four studies provides converging support for our hypothesis. In study 1a, participants initially learned about a (purportedly) more versus less effective strategy for controlling calorie intake. Next, in an ostensibly unrelated study, participants reported their desire to eat each of three unhealthy food items. The three responses were averaged into a composite measure of self-control (larger values indicate less interest in unhealthy food). Finally, participants completed a series of control measures, in which a trait self-control scale specific to eating (Giner-Sorolla 2001) was embedded. As predicted, greater perceived strategy effectiveness reduced self-control (i.e., increased interest in unhealthy food) in participants low in trait self-control. We replicated this finding in study 1b by using the domain-general scale (Tangney et al. 2004) to measure chronic self-control as well as addressed alternative explanations.

In study 2, we tested our predictions by using a behavioral measure of self-control. Participants first read about a (purportedly) more versus less effective behavioral strategy for overcoming procrastination. Next, participants performed two tasks within a time window of 10 minutes, which created a procrastination situation. The first of these was to play an enjoyable yet inconsequential computer game (Tetris), whereas the second task was to work on a boring but consequential writing task for which the top 50% performers would qualify for an opportunity to earn a performance-based bonus payment. We operationalized self-control in terms of the amount of time spent on the writing task (more time spent on the writing task reflects greater self-control). As hypothesized, greater perceived strategy effectiveness reduced self-control (i.e., less time spent on the writing task) in participants low in trait self-control, whereas it had the opposite effect among participants high in trait self-control.

Study 3 sheds light on the psychological process underlying this effect by including a measure of anticipated guilt (adapted from Dahl, Honea, and Manchanda 2003). Participants initially completed the brief self-control scale (Tangney et al. 2004) embedded in other scales. Then, they read about a (purportedly) more versus less effective strategy for becoming more patient. After reading about the strategy, participants completed a filler task. Upon the completion of the filler task, they were asked to make a consequential choice between a smaller immediate payment and a larger payment that was delayed by 8 days. In line with our theorizing, greater perceived strategy effectiveness led to a higher probability of choosing the immediate smaller payment for individuals low in trait self-control, but had no such effect among those high in trait self-control. Critically, the anticipated guilt associated with choosing the smaller immediate payment mediated the effect observed among those low in trait self-control.

In sum, this research shows that providing people who are chronically low in self-control with highly effective self-control strategies may have unintended adverse consequences.

REFERENCES


