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MailOnline

Teach yourself willpower

Can't commit to the gym? Struggle to stay on a diet? The solution could be simpler than you think

By SARAH HUGHES

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All my life, I've wished I had willpower. Where close friends are strong-willed and determined, ploughing their own paths through life and saying no if something doesn't appeal, I've always been the type to cave in under pressure.

As a teenager, if someone suggested breaking the rules, I'd hesitate for all of ten seconds before muttering: 'Oh, OK then, let's bunk off games and head to the coffee shop.'

And my resolve didn't improve with age. In my 20s, I found it impossible to say no to the next glass of wine, the last hour's dancing, the final cigarette. And my willpower where smoking was concerned was so low I used to joke that my husband kept getting me pregnant in order to make me stop.



Temptation: A new book promises to help people learn self-control

Now I'm 38 and — after three pregnancies, two lapses and a considerable expenditure of energy — am no longer a smoker. Instead, my willpower issues largely centre on food.

In my ideal world, I would lose the stone-and-a-half I've needed to shed for the past three years. But I've never managed to stick to any system to do so.

My problem isn't with eating or with exercise (I cook healthily and exercise three times a week), but the simple fact is each night in a matter of seconds — the time it takes my husband to suggest a plate of biscuits with cheese — I undo all the good I've done earlier.

To sum up, I am not just weak willed, I am will-less. Luckily, help may finally be at hand thanks to a new book which promises not only to help us learn self-control, but also to explain why so many of us find it so difficult to say no.

'Ask people to name their greatest strengths and they'll often credit themselves with honesty, kindness, humour, creativity and even modesty — but not self-control,' write Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney in their book *Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength*, a bestseller in the U.S..

'Conversely, when people were asked about their failings, a lack of self-control was top of the list.'

Of course, it's true we live in an era filled with temptations and distractions. It's easy to say: 'Oh I'll finish this work later, after I've checked Facebook, looked at Twitter and had a search of the internet.'

So what can be done — is it possible to learn how to have willpower?

Baumeister and Tierney say yes.



Resist sweet treats: Cravings can be beaten by controlling glucose levels and sleep habits (posed by model)

They claim self-control is about more than just saying no to things. Instead, they suggest our levels of willpower are directly linked to our consumption of glucose (in other words, sugar).

Their findings show the moments when our glucose levels are at their lowest are the moments when we make poor decisions or fail to get anything done.

By analysing studies performed on groups as diverse as convicts in Finland and children at primary school in America, the authors found the lower our blood sugar levels, the angrier we feel and, in turn, the less control we have over our actions.

In one test, subjects were split into two groups. One was given lemonade mixed with sugar, the other a drink with diet sweetener (which therefore lacked glucose). Both were then told to play a computer game. As the game got harder, those who had sipped the drink with sugar grumbled mildly, but kept playing, while those who had the diet drink 'started cursing and banging the computer'.

KING OF DENIAL

David Blaine displayed extreme willpower by living without food — he had only water — for 44 days in a Perspex box above the Thames

Nor is it simply our levels of tiredness and aggression which are affected by low blood sugar. According to the book, using the part of our brain that determines self-control, the fronto-median cortex, uses up more of our body's glucose supplies than normal.

This causes us to crave sweet things to replenish our blood sugar levels, making us reach for biscuits rather than healthier savoury foods. All of which sounds like bad news for dieters and explains why healthy eating plans can be so hard to stick to.

They put us in a catch-22 situation: the very act of exerting self-control over our food makes us crave the sweet things we shouldn't eat. Nor is it simply a case of overhauling what we eat. Another key factor is when we eat it.

'Glucose depletion can turn even the most charming companion into a monster,' write the authors. 'The old advice about eating a good breakfast applies all day long, particularly on days when you're physically or mentally stressed.'

'Don't get into an argument with your boss four hours after lunch. Don't thrash out serious problems with your partner just before dinner.'

The book claims if we want to improve our resolve, our sleeping habits need to be altered as well — those who sleep longer at night have more willpower as they are more rested.

'Adults routinely short-change themselves on sleep and the result is less self-control,' they write. 'The more researchers study sleep deprivation, the more nasty effects they discover.'

HOW TO MAXIMISE YOUR WILLPOWER

- Know your limits. Your supply of willpower is limited so you may start each day with a renewed stock, but things will gradually deplete it.
- If you sense your glucose levels are low, reach for a low GI snack, such as a handful of blueberries or nuts.
- Pick your battles. You can't control the stresses in your life, but you can make sure you're not trying to diet at the same time as giving up alcohol and starting a new job.
- Don't get stuck in a routine. To break a habit like smoking, do it on holiday when you're far away from the people, places and events you associate with cigarettes.
- When you set a goal, have a reward for reaching it. Never underestimate how little it takes to motivate.
- Remember, what matters is the exertion not the outcome. If you struggle with temptation and then give in, your reserves of willpower are still depleted because you struggled.

'Those who sleep less have weaker self-control and subsequently make poorer decisions.'

So what else should the willpower-deprived be doing to change their lives around? Crucially, the authors say you only have a 'finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted when you use it'.

In other words, rather than taking a scattergun approach to self-control by trying to curb all your bad habits at once, you should pick the one thing you wish to change most.

'People who are trying to quit smoking, for example, will have their best shot at succeeding if they aren't changing other behaviours at the same time,' they say.

'Those who try to quit smoking while also restricting their eating or cutting back on alcohol tend to fail at all three — probably because they have too many simultaneous demands on their willpower.'

Those who wish to lose weight are 'better off using self-control to make gradual changes that will produce lasting effects'.

The first of these changes is to establish realistic goals. So instead of worrying over my inability to shed that stone-and-a-half, I should look in the mirror, weigh myself and draw up a sensible plan.

So could I rediscover my willpower with this book? I decided to spend seven days following its rules — sleeping eight hours a night, eating healthily and keeping a food diary and prioritising the things I found most important, letting the lesser worries go.

It wasn't easy and I didn't always feel entirely sane — the low point was finding myself murmuring 'your glucose levels are low, your glucose levels are low' while trying to cope with a recalcitrant four-year-old.

But, at the end of that week, I felt healthier and happier than I had done all year. Best of all, I'd also lost two pounds.

Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength, Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney, will be published by Allen Lane in January 2012

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I usually give in to my cravings :(, those darn carrot sticks , I just can't help myself . I find that sometimes if I have some chocolate chunks handy in the fridge I'll go for those instead .

- Susan, Inverness-shire, 17/10/2011 19:12

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You learn discipline through sports. I think there's a strong correlation with the lack of British girls playing REAL sports in school and the size of British women's derrieres (besides the obvious). This country needs to commit to a more rigorous sports program and stop being afraid to sweat!

- slim, london, 17/10/2011 18:04

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That's all rubbish, because people in China, Japan and other far East countries don't crave sweet things. In fact they much prefer savoury things.

- Peter Pan, UK, 17/10/2011 18:01

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I went on LighterLife diet & craved peaches!

- lesley, Stockport, 17/10/2011 17:18

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I don't know why Steve,UK has been downvoted so much, he speaks (types) the truth. Creating a calorie deficit is the only way to lose weight, even a celeb miracle diet will work around the basic principle that if you use more calories than you take onboard you will lose weight. How you go about creating this deficit is the tricky part but as Steve and many of my patients prove, it's easy enough if you are prepared to put the hard work in.

- Chris, UK, 17/10/2011 17:16

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fruit contains vast amounts of natural sugar but i dont know anyone that craves a peach, including myself! wish i did

- kittykat, london, 17/10/2011 16:31

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