



Willpower

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3. - A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TO-DO LIST, FROM GOD TO DREW CAREY




Psychologists have generally assumed that earworms are an unfortunate byproduct of an otherwise useful function: the completion of tasks.

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7. - OUTSMARTING YOURSELF IN THE HEART OF


DARKNESS

 *Self-control turned out to be most effective when people used it to establish good habits and break bad ones.* [165](#)


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 *As Stanley realized, self-control is not selfish. Willpower enables us to get along with others and override impulses that are based on personal short-term interests.* [170](#)


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 *"Why" questions push the mind up to higher levels of thinking and a focus on the future. "How" questions bring the mind down to low levels of thinking and a focus on the present.* [172](#)

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 *The results showed that a narrow, concrete, here-and-now focus works against self-control, whereas a broad, abstract, long-term focus supports it. That's one reason why religious people score relatively high in measures of self-control, and why nonreligious people like Stanley can benefit by other kinds of transcendent thoughts and enduring ideals* [172](#)

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 *This poor body of mine has suffered terribly . . . it has been degraded, pained, wearied & sickened, and has well nigh sunk under the task imposed on it; but this was but a small portion of myself. For my real self lay darkly encased, & was ever too haughty & soaring for such miserable environments as the body that encumbered it daily. Was Stanley, in his moment of despair, succumbing to religion and imagining himself with a soul? Maybe.* [173](#)

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8. - DID A HIGHER POWER HELP ERIC CLAPTON AND MARY KARR STOP DRINKING?

 *Contrary to popular stereotype, alcohol doesn't increase your impulse to do stupid or destructive things; instead, it simply removes restraints. It lessens self-control in two ways: by lowering blood glucose and by reducing self-awareness.* [175](#)

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 *"An atheist would probably say it was just a change of attitude," he says, "and to a certain extent that's true, but there was much more to it than that." Ever since then, he has prayed for help every morning and night,* [176](#)

kneeling down because he feels the need to humble himself. Why kneel and pray? "Because it works, as simple as that," Clapton says, repeating a discovery that reformed hedonists have been reporting for thousands of years. Sometimes it happens instantly, as with Clapton or St. Augustine, who reported receiving a direct command from God to stop drinking, whereupon "all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

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Even when social scientists can't accept supernatural beliefs, they recognize that religion is a profoundly influential human phenomenon that has been evolving effective self-control mechanisms for thousands of years

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When the young Eric Clapton went with friends to a jazz festival in rural England, he drank enough at a pub to start dancing on tables—and that was his last memory until he woke up the next morning by himself in the middle of nowhere. "I had no money, I had shit myself, I had pissed myself, I had puked all over myself, and I had no idea where I was," he recalls. "But the really insane thing was, I couldn't wait to do it all again. I thought there was something otherworldly about the whole culture of drinking, that being drunk made me a member of some strange, mysterious club." That's the negative side of peer pressure.

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for example, there was a social convention called the "barbecue law," which meant that all the men who gathered for a barbecue were expected to drink until they were soused. To refuse a drink entailed a serious insult to the host and the rest of the party. More recently, many studies have found that people drink more when they're encouraged by their friends

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Religious people are less likely than others to develop unhealthy habits, like getting drunk, engaging in risky sex, taking illicit drugs, and smoking cigarettes.

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*They're more likely to wear seat belts, visit a dentist, and take vitamins. They have better social support, and their faith helps them cope psychologically with misfortunes. And they have better self-control, as McCullough and his colleague at the University of Miami, Brian Willoughby, recently concluded after analyzing hundreds of studies of religion and self-control over eight decades. Their analysis was published in 2009 in the *Psychological Bulletin*, one of the most prestigious and rigorous journals in the field. Some of the effects of religion were unsurprising: Religion promotes family values and social harmony, in part because some values gain in importance by being supposedly linked to God's will or other religious values. Less obvious benefits included the finding that religion reduces people's inner conflicts among different goals and values. As we noted earlier,*

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conflicting goals impede self-regulation, so it appears that religion reduces such problems by providing believers with clearer priorities.

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Religious believers build self-control by regularly forcing themselves to interrupt their daily routines in order to pray. Some religions, like Islam, require prayers at fixed times every day. Many religions prescribe periods of fasting, like the day of Yom Kippur, the month of Ramadan, and the forty days of Lent. Religions mandate specific patterns of eating, like kosher food or vegetarianism. Some services and meditations require the believer to adopt and hold specific poses (like kneeling, or sitting cross-legged in the lotus position) so long that they become uncomfortable and require discipline to maintain them.

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Religion also improves the monitoring of behavior, another of the central steps to self-control. Religious people tend to feel that someone important is watching them.

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But even after taking that factor into account, researchers still see evidence that self-control improves with religion, and many people instinctively reach the same conclusion—that's why they take up

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religion when they want more control.

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Psychologists have found that people who attend religious services for extrinsic reasons, like wanting to impress others or make social connections, don't have the same high level of self-control as the true believers.

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Nor is it just a coincidence that people who have set aside the Bible end up buying so many books with new sets of rules for living. They replace the Ten Commandments with the 12 Steps or the Eightfold Path or the 7 Habits. Even if they don't believe in the God of Moses, they like the idea of codes on sacred tablets.

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9. - RAISING STRONG CHILDREN: SELF-ESTEEM VERSUS SELF-CONTROL

Andrew Mecca, the drug-treatment expert who became chairman of California's task force on self-esteem, explained that "virtually every social problem can be traced to people's lack of self-love."

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All this enthusiasm led to a new approach to child rearing imparted by psychologists, teachers, journalists, and artists like Whitney Houston. She summed up this philosophy in her 1980s hit song "The Greatest Love of All," which was revealed to be none other than . . . oneself. The key to success was self-esteem. For children to succeed, she explained, they simply need to be shown "all the beauty they possess inside."

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Whitney Houston's message was carried to the next generation by Lady Gaga, who reassured her fans at a concert, "You're a superstar no matter who you are or where you come from—and you were born that way!" The fans cheered her right back, naturally, and then Lady Gaga reciprocated by lifting a bright torch and sweeping its light across the audience. "Hey, kids!" she shouted. "When you leave tonight, you don't leave loving me more. You leave loving yourself more!"

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There seem to be only two clearly demonstrated benefits of high self-esteem, according to the review panel

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First, it increases initiative

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This unfortunately includes being extra willing to do stupid or destructive things, even when everyone else advises against them

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Second, it feels good.

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When the psychologist Delroy Paulhus asked people in groups to rate one another, the narcissists seemed to be everyone's favorite person, but only during the first few meetings. After a few months, they usually slipped to the bottom of the rankings. God's gift to the world can be hard to live with.

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Players need concentration to fight off Ork after Ork; they need patience to mine for virtual gold; they need thriftiness to save up for a new sword or helmet.

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Instead of bemoaning the games' hold over children, we should be exploiting the techniques that game designers have developed.

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They've refined the basic steps of self-control: setting clear and attainable goals, giving instantaneous feedback, and offering enough encouragement for people to keep practicing and improving.

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10. - THE PERFECT STORM OF DIETING



1. Never go on a diet. 2. Never vow to give up chocolate or any other food. 3. Whether you're judging yourself or judging others, never equate being overweight with having weak willpower.

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The supposed ideal of a 36-24-36 figure translates to someone with size 4 hips, a size 2 waist, and a size 10 bust—someone, that is, with ample breasts but little body fat, who must be either a genetic anomaly or the product of plastic surgery.

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It worked the other way: Their obesity made them likely to go on diets, and their diets caused them to rely on external instead of internal cues. For what is a diet but a plan imposing external rules? Dieters learn to eat according to a plan, not to their inner feelings and cravings

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They're trapped in a nutritional catch-22: 1. In order not to eat, a dieter needs willpower. 2. In order to have willpower, a dieter needs to eat.

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CONCLUSION: - THE FUTURE OF WILLPOWER—MORE GAIN, LESS STRAIN





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Willpower 101, First Lesson: Know Your Limits

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Limits

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Giving in does not replenish the willpower you have already expended

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