

Helpful self-control: Autonomy support, vitality, and depletion [☆]

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Abstract

Why someone exerts self-control may influence how depleting a task is. Feeling compelled to exert self-control require more self-control strength than exerting self-control for more autonomous reasons. Across three experiments, individuals whose autonomy was supported while exerting self-control performed better on a subsequent test of self-control as compared to individuals who had more pressure placed upon them while exerting self-control. The differences in self-control performance were not due to anxiety, stress, unpleasantness, or reduced motivation among the controlled participants. Additional analyses suggested that the decline in self-control performance was mediated by subjective vitality. Feelings of autonomy support lead to enhanced feelings of subjective vitality. This increased vitality may help replenish lost ego-strength, which lead to better self-control performance subsequently.

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Are attempts to lose weight more likely to succeed when the person feels that it is his or her free choice to diet or when he or she feels pressure to do so? Extensive research has found that individuals who diet in autonomy supportive situations have an easier time and are more likely to lose weight than individuals who diet in a more controlling environments (e.g., Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996). These results suggest that the quality, as well as the quantity, of motivation apparently plays a role in how effortful self-control is. This implies that the type of motivation (either self-driven or externally determined) may affect the degree of ego-depletion (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In short, it is possible not all self-control is alike—why someone is exerting self-control may matter.

Self-control is the process of overriding or inhibiting automatic, habitual, or innate behaviors, urges, emotions, or desires that would otherwise interfere with goal directed behavior (Barkley, 1997a; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Kanfer & Karoly, 1972). Without self-control, an individual would engage in automatic, habitual, or innate behaviors (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Hayes, 1989; Shallice & Burgess, 1993). Researchers have theorized that self-control depends on, requires and depletes a limited resource (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). If that is the case, then after exerting self-control, subsequent attempts at self-control should be more likely to fail, as this needed strength is diminished. Indeed, individuals who had to suppress the thought of a white bear (a difficult self-control exercise) subsequently consumed more alcohol in a situation that called for restraint than individuals who solved math problems (a task that requires far less self-control). Individuals who regulated their thoughts did not differ in mood, arousal, frustration, or effort from individuals who solved math problems; the only difference was the amount of self-control required (Muraven, Collins, & Nienhaus, 2002). Similarly, depleted individuals have been found to drink more

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alcohol (especially when motivated not to drink, Muraven, Collins, Shiffman, & Paty, 2005), regulate physical demands more poorly (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998), and have difficulty with complex mental activities (Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). However, depletion seems to have no effect on individuals who are not exerting self-control (Muraven et al., 2005; Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Overall, the effects of exerting self-control generalize to a wide variety of behaviors that require inhibition or self-control.

In summary, research has found that the more self-control individuals report exerting, the more self-control strength they deplete (Muraven et al., 2002). To date, this has been a direct relationship: more self-control leads to more depletion. The present research seeks to explore a moderator of that effect. In particular, individuals' feeling of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985) should play an important role in determining how depleting a self-control activity may be. Feeling forced or pressured by the situation to exert self-control may lead to greater depletion of self-control resources than exerting self-control for more volitional or autonomous reasons. Autonomy support should reduce the magnitude of depletion.

Autonomy support

A fact of life is that we all must engage in tasks we do not particularly care for or want to do. Sometimes we need to change habits to live healthier lives, or engage in tasks that we do not enjoy doing but that are necessary (e.g., cleaning dishes). This is probably especially true of exerting self-control. However, one can feel more or less autonomous in the engagement of such tasks. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a framework to understand how these feelings of autonomy (or, conversely, feeling compelled to act) yields different behavioral outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). At the core, SDT proposes two types of motivation: Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something for its own sake, such as interest or enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to doing something for instrumental reasons. These motivations fall on a continuum, ranging from the acts done for the pleasure of it (intrinsic) to acts done to gain rewards or to avoid punishment (extrinsic). Importantly, a persons' motivation for a task can be changed. Situations that are perceived as more controlling (for example, because of deadlines, external rewards, or potential punishments) may reduce intrinsic motivation and lead to a more extrinsic orientation.

Alternatively, situations that are autonomy supportive encourage a more intrinsic motivation. More precisely, SDT suggests that autonomous motivation should be enhanced when basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied in one's social environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Research has shown that situations where the person's feelings and experiences are acknowledged, where the person is left free to choose a course of action that suits his or her personal

needs and desires, and where the person is given information to make the best possible decision, are more conducive to the person's endorsement and commitment to the new course of action, and thus to autonomous motivation (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984; Williams et al., 1996). Other research has shown that non-pressuring instructions (Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983), or explicit choices (Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978), seem to enhance autonomous motivation.

We suggest that exerting self-control in a controlling setting is more depleting of self-control strength than exerting self-control in an autonomy supportive setting. Numerous field studies have found that exerting self-control in an autonomy supportive context leads to better outcomes and decreased likelihood of failure than feeling forced to exert self-control. For instance, Hom and Fabes (1985) found that children were better able to delaying gratification when they had a choice between incentives than when they did not. Likewise, as compared to individuals who felt compelled to exert self-control, individuals who felt more supported in their self-control efforts tend to have better outcomes on activities that require self-control, such as dieting (Williams et al., 1996), smoking cessation (Curry, Wagner, & Grothaus, 1990; Williams, Gagné, Ryan, & Deci, 2002), and alcohol abstinence (Ryan, Plant, & O'Malley, 1995). In short, numerous field studies have found that exerting self-control in an autonomy supportive context leads to better outcomes and decreased likelihood of failure than feeling forced to exert self-control. One reason is that it may be more depleting to exert self-control when under pressure than when it is more freely chosen.

Vitality

Subjective vitality may help to explain why autonomy support while exerting self-control depletes less strength. Subjective vitality is defined as "a subjective feeling of aliveness and energy" (Ryan & Frederick, 1997, p. 529) that arises from feelings of freedom, autonomy support, and intrinsic motivation. Although it has some similarities, vitality is different than positive affect (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999). It is a positive, energetic, vital state that increases when people engage in behaviors that feel autonomous or self-driven, and decreases when people feel pressure to act.

Vitality may help in the recovery of lost self-control strength. Usually, after exerting self-control, strength is depleted and this lost strength contributes to reduced self-control performance (see Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Feeling vital may help replenish strength at a much quicker rate, however. That is, strength is recovered faster when people feel vital, resulting in better self-control performance subsequently. This means that the energizing and positive experience of regulating a behavior for autonomous reasons leads to a more rapid recovery of strength,

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