

NO WILLPOWER? THINK POSITIVE!

Identify your goals and go for short-term rewards, says
GILLIAN RILEY, and you will be on your way to achieving
your long-term aims



Author and counsellor Gillian Riley.

How would you rate your willpower? Chances are the strength of your will depends very much on circumstances. You score eight out of ten, perhaps, when it comes to your will to overcome challenges at work. Ten out of ten – completely unstoppable! – if it comes to the lives of your children.

But zero in the chocolate biscuit department.

The accepted wisdom regarding willpower is that only exceptionally assertive, high-achieving people have it. All we mere mortals can ever hope for is to cling on to scraps of willpower for very limited periods of time. We need every ounce of effort we can muster, while all the time knowing we cannot possibly sustain this ongoing struggle with ourselves. Willpower gets a bad name because we feel dreadful for over-indulging, but self-control leaves us miserably deprived.

But why do we have willpower in some areas of our lives and not in others? Why is it that, if necessary, we would go through hell and high water for some things yet we fail repeatedly in others, even though we feel strongly motivated to change?

Willpower is tricky, especially when it comes to everyday habits and behaviours such as smoking and overeating. However there are things to consider that can strengthen your power of will.

Clear goals

Get clear about your goals (*what* do you intend to do, *when* do you

intend to do it?) and motivation (*why* do you want to do this?) before those moments of temptation strike. If you stay vague about them, giving in to temptation is just an accident waiting to happen.

Identify rewards that you will be able to notice sooner rather than later. For example, if you eat a lot less sugar you might find you are thinking more clearly, enjoying more energy and a positive mood, and gaining a good sense of achievement and control. Recognising benefits within a day or two is going to be far more effective than the agonisingly slow and erratic reward of weight loss and improved appearance. This will come in time, of course, but if you can focus on more immediate rewards you are more likely to be motivated to stay the course and achieve the weight loss you want. And even more important, you are more likely to maintain it as well.

Look at this example of a common problem that arises when appearance is the only motivation to eat less: "My overeating used to go in cycles where I would lose weight to look good for a certain occasion, but when I got there, even though everyone went on about ►

how good I looked, I felt empty and anxious. I wasn't doing anything for myself, all for other people, caring only about what they thought. So then, afterwards, I would put all the weight back on and more. I have been helped to change my motivation. Now I want to be me, it's that simple."

Free choice

Willpower is, quite literally, the power of your will, and if you understand it like that you can see that it's not possible not to have any. You always have free will – assuming, of course, you are not tied into a straight jacket! In order to use the power of your will, you will need to think in terms of free choice. And in order to do that, start to weed out thoughts such as: "I mustn't...", "I'm not allowed..." and "I have to stop..." This attitude denies free choice and blocks your ability to use your will. Sooner or later you are likely to rebel: "I'm not supposed to be eating these biscuits, but so what, I'm going to be naughty," or the very common,

stance you're in. One of the best ways to justify over-indulgence is the self-fulfilling prophecy, "I don't have any willpower!" Faced with temptation, you explain why you are giving in to it again by reminding yourself of your lack of willpower in this situation, confirming it to yourself one more time. So failure means you'll predict failure next time, which creates more failure.

Seeing how thoughts such as these perpetuate your lack of willpower is one key to making changes. The point is, you can change your thoughts. Just because you didn't use willpower in the past, doesn't mean you are unable to use it ever.

Secret challenge

Be very careful about who gets involved with you and your decisions about using willpower. It might be best not to discuss it at all. A reader wrote the following to me in an email: "In the past my boyfriend has often commented on how much I eat, so I feel I don't

have the freedom to eat when I'm with him. I would have a binge as soon as he went out or in quick bursts in the kitchen while he was watching TV. It's still difficult because I feel like I want to eat something as soon as he walks in the door."

Even well-intentioned 'support' can lead to this kind of counter-productive rebellion. Knowing that this can happen can make a huge difference in stopping smoking. I always encourage smokers to keep quitting as private as they can for the first few days or even weeks if possible.

Self-esteem

Low self-esteem is strongly linked with poor willpower, both as a cause and as an effect. Low self-esteem suggests that you are not worth the effort of self-control, so you don't even try to use willpower in the certain knowledge that you will 'fail', and this has the effect of confirming your low sense of self-worth.

The common mistake is to wait for stronger self-esteem: "If only I felt more confident in myself, I'd go ahead and stop smoking and/or take control of my overeating." Using willpower requires a leap of faith, to be willing to go ahead and see what happens, even though you 'know' you'll fail. It also means being willing to live with success once you have achieved it. You need to be willing to acknowledge your success and stop focusing on the imperfections of your achievement. The key is to allow self-esteem to grow stronger so that you no longer fear success so much that you sabotage yourself in order to feel safe again. 🍀

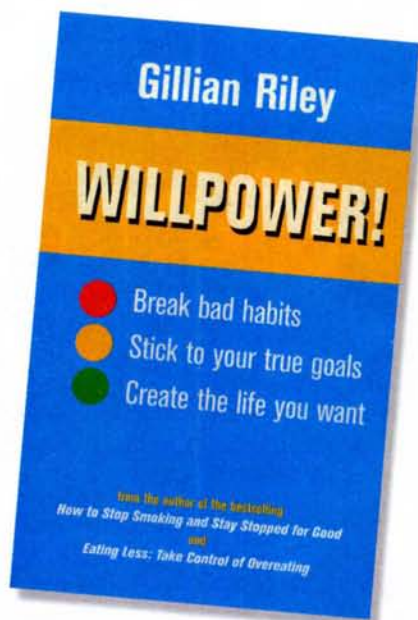
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"I've got to stop smoking, but not today." Later on, you regret what you're doing, feel discouraged and wish you had more willpower.

Begin to shift this self-defeating attitude by declaring your free choice to do whatever you want to do – being honest, of course, about what it is that you *really* want to do. This means weighing up instant versus delayed gratification and freely choosing which one you want, given that you can't have both.

An excuse

Moments of temptation will always be accompanied by ready-made excuses, tailored to fit the circum-



Gillian Riley has written five self-help books on overeating and smoking, including *Willpower!* and *Eating Less: Take Control of Overeating* (both published by Vermilion/Random House). She leads weekend workshops on dealing with overeating and can be reached via her website www.eatingless.com