

Sunday Review

The Only Way to Keep Your Resolutions

Gray Matter

By DAVID DeSTENO DEC. 29, 2017

New Year's Eve is a time to set goals: to eat better, to save more money, to work harder, to drink less. It's Day 1 on the road to a "new you." But this road, as we all know, is difficult to follow. Humans are notoriously bad at resisting temptation, especially (as research confirms) if we're busy, tired or stressed. By Jan. 8, some 25 percent of resolutions have fallen by the wayside. And by the time the year ends, fewer than 10 percent have been fully kept.

Unfortunately, the problem of New Year's resolutions is, in a way, the problem of life itself. Our tendency to be shortsighted — to value the pleasures of the present more than the satisfactions of the future — comes at a considerable cost. Surely by now you've heard of the psychologist Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiments, in which children who could resist the temptation to immediately eat one sweet would be rewarded with a second sweet about 15 minutes later. Professor Mischel found that those who could wait — those who had self-control — were also the ones who had better academic and professional success years later.

Since then, study after study has linked self-control to achievement in a wide range of areas, including personal finance, healthful eating and exercise, and job performance. Put simply, those who can persevere toward their long-term goals in the face of temptation to do otherwise — those who have "grit" — are best positioned for success.

If what I've said so far sounds familiar, that's because over the past 30 years, in response to these findings, something of a cottage industry has sprung

up to tell us how to increase our self-control. If you peruse the books on the best-seller lists, you'll find variations on a theme: The best way to increase self-control is to use our willpower (and related mental capacities like executive function — that part of the mind that directs planning and reasoning) to ignore or suppress our craving for immediate pleasure.

But after a few decades of using this information, not much seems to have changed. We're still spending too much on impulse buys rather than saving for retirement, still continuing to indulge our sweet tooth rather than eating healthfully. Why?

The answer, I contend, is that this view of self-control is wrong. In choosing to rely on rational analysis and willpower to stick to our goals, we're disadvantaging ourselves. We're using tools that aren't only weak; they're also potentially harmful. If using willpower to keep your nose to the grindstone feels like a struggle, that's because it is. Your mind is fighting against itself. It's trying to convince, cajole and, if that fails, suppress a desire for immediate pleasure. Given self-control's importance for success, it seems as if evolution should have provided us with a tool for it that was less excruciating to use.

I believe it did; we're just ignoring it. That tool is our social emotions. These are the emotions — things like gratitude and compassion — that support the positive aspects of social life. For years I've been studying the effects of these emotions on decision-making and behavior, and I've found that unlike reason and willpower, they naturally incline us to be patient and persevere. When you are experiencing these emotions, self-control is no longer a battle, for they work not by squashing our desires for pleasure in the moment but by increasing how much we value the future.

We too often think about self-improvement and the pursuit of our goals in bracing, self-flagellating terms: I will do better, I will muscle through, I will wake up earlier. But it doesn't need to be that way, and it shouldn't: Self-control isn't about feeling miserable.

The research on self-control shows that willpower, for all its benefits, wanes over time. As we try to make ourselves study, work, exercise or save money, the mental effort to keep focused and motivated increases until it seems too difficult to bear.

Worse, exerting willpower can take a psychological and physical toll. As recent work by the Northwestern University psychologist Greg Miller has shown, willing oneself to be “gritty” can be quite stressful. Studying about 300 teenagers from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Professor Miller found that those who were better at using self-control did have more success when it came to resisting temptations, but at a cost to their health. Their bodies suffered not only from increased stress responses, but also from premature aging of their immune cells.

At moderate levels, the tendency to pursue achievement through willpower and rational analysis can be a boon. But at higher levels, it’s a detriment to well-being — especially if you fail. When people who are exceedingly focused and dedicated to using force of will to achieve their goals come up short, they report a hit to their well-being that is 120 percent greater than that reported by those who follow a less austere and stressful path.

From an evolutionary perspective, the fact that exercising willpower doesn’t come naturally to us makes a lot of sense. For millennia, what led to success wasn’t the ability to study for exams, save for retirement, go to the gym or wait for a second marshmallow. For most of our evolutionary history, none of these self-focused goals mattered or even existed. It’s far more likely that what led to success was strong social bonds — relationships that would encourage people to cooperate and lend support to one another, which helped to ensure that their sacrifices would be returned time and again when required in the future.

But to establish and maintain relationships, people would have had to be fair, honest, generous, diligent and loyal. They would have had to be perceived as good partners. In other words, they would have had to behave *morally*.

What underlies these moral traits is the ability to put something else ahead of your own immediate desires and interests — to exercise self-control. Working hard to keep up your end of a deal or helping another person by giving time, money, food or a shoulder to cry on all require a willingness to sacrifice some resources in the moment. In exchange, you reap the benefits of those strong relationships down the line.

When it comes to making such short-term sacrifices, most of us don’t rely on a cold, rational analysis of costs and benefits. We don’t normally calculate what’s to be gained by helping someone else. We just *feel* like we should. It’s our

emotions — specifically, gratitude, compassion and an authentic sense of pride (not hubris) — that push us to behave in ways that show self-control.

I'm sure I'm not alone in saying that I've moved more couches and spent more time making gifts for friends than I thought possible when I felt gratitude toward them and wanted to show appreciation. Or that I've worked longer and harder on difficult tasks when I wanted to feel proud about my abilities and contributions to a team. Or that I've given more support to people when moved by compassion to do so.

More than a decade's worth of research backs up this picture. Studies from my lab, for example, show that gratitude directly increases self-control. In a version of the marshmallow test adapted for adults, we had people take a few minutes to recall an event that made them feel grateful, neutral or happy. Next, we had them answer a series of questions of the form "Would you rather have \$X now or \$Y in Z days?" with Y always being bigger than X, and Z varying over weeks to months. From these questions, we could calculate how much people discounted the value of the future.

Those feeling neutral or happy were pretty impatient. They were willing to forgo receiving \$100 in a year if we gave them \$18 today. Those who were feeling gratitude, however, showed nearly double the self-control. They required at least \$30 to forgo the later reward. In a similar vein, we followed people for three weeks, measuring their levels of daily gratitude, and found the same boost to self-control. Our research also shows that when we make people feel grateful, they'll spend more time helping anyone who asks for assistance, they'll make financial decisions that benefit partners equally (rather than ones that allow profit at a partner's expense), and they'll show loyalty to those who have helped them even at costs to themselves.

What my lab, and others, found when we looked at pride was similar. Making people feel proud — not arrogant, but proud of the skills they have — makes them more willing to wait for future rewards and more willing to take on leadership roles in groups and work longer and harder to help a team solve a difficult problem. Likewise, when we make people feel compassion, they'll take on the burdens of others, spending more time and effort to help get others out of jams and ease their distress.

What these findings show is that pride, gratitude and compassion, whether

we consciously realize it or not, reduce the human mind's tendency to discount the value of the future. In so doing, they push us not only to cooperate with other people but also to help our own future selves. Feeling pride or compassion has been shown to increase perseverance on difficult tasks by over 30 percent. Likewise, gratitude and compassion have been tied to better academic performance, a greater willingness to exercise and eat healthily, and lower levels of consumerism, impulsivity and tobacco and alcohol use.

If using willpower causes stress, using these emotions actually heals: They slow heart rate, lower blood pressure and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. By making us value the future more, they ease the way to patience and perseverance.

Perhaps most important, while these emotions enhance self-control, they also combat another problem of modern life: loneliness. From 1985 to 2004, the percentage of people who reported having at least one friend on whom they could rely and with whom they could discuss important matters dropped to 57 percent from 80 percent. Today, more than half of all Americans report feeling lonely, especially in their professional lives. But study after study has shown that those who are seen as grateful, warm and justifiably confident draw others to them. Because these emotions automatically make us less selfish, they help ensure we can form relationships with people who will be there to support us when we need it.

Cultivating the social emotions maximizes both our “résumé virtues” (those that underlie professional success) and our “eulogy virtues” (those for which we want to be remembered). In nudging the mind to be more patient and more selfless, they benefit everyone whom our decisions impact, including our own future selves. In short, they give us not only grit but also grace.

So as 2018 commences, take more time to cultivate these emotions. Reflect on what you're grateful to have been given. Allow your mind to step into the shoes of those in need and feel for them. Take pride in the small achievements on the path to your goals. Doing so will help ensure that every future New Year's Eve will have more to celebrate than to regret.

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