

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Willpower



We have all heard the expression “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”. That is one way to describe willpower. The famous football coach, Vince Lombardi spoke of it in these terms: “The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather of will.” Willpower is your capability of deciding on a plan of action and sticking to it. It is the force of self-discipline that gives you the initial boost.

For example, if you wish to lose weight you must rid your environment – house, office, etc. – of all the foods you must stop eating. Reduce the external temptation. If you are a smoker, drinker, or other substance abuser, throw away those cigarettes and stop hanging out in smoky places or with a smoking crowd. Avoid situations that will trigger your desire to consume the desired product. If you are considering doing something that you think is wrong, like stealing, cheating, or some other activity that you will later regret, tell yourself “NO”. Stay away from those people, places, and situations, and be resolved to be strong and keep telling yourself “NO”. It requires inner strength, but it does work. Force yourself to take little steps to prevent yourself from doing what you have consciously chosen not to do. Choose to be strong and not to be a weakling. Think of the long term benefits of being strong now. Reward yourself in positive ways for accomplishing the goals that you have set.

This act of personal resistance can be seen as your conscious mind, the one that has good sense and knows better, battling the unconscious mind that wants that piece of chocolate pie right now. Some people are better at exercising their willpower than others, but it is something that we all can learn. It really works!

A recent study, sometimes called the marshmallow test, involved a group of very young schoolchildren who enter a room that has a marshmallow or a cookie sitting on a napkin in front of them. The teacher tells them that they have a choice: they can eat their goody right away and that will be the end of it, or they can wait until later, when the teacher tells them to go ahead and eat it, and then they will get a second treat to eat right away. Some children eat the marshmallow or cookie right away. Others wait to get the bonus. This is all a matter of willpower.

Here are a few questions similar to ones I found on an Italian website, that give you a measure of your own level of willpower, which you can increase if you so desire. Your answers can be one of the following four: 1) No; 2) I’m not sure; 3) I think so; 4) Yes, sure

- 1 - Your doctor told you to follow a strict dietary regime; are you going to follow it, despite the sacrifices you will have to make?
- 2 - In a month you will participate in contest for a prestigious and demanding job. You need to be very prepared, and you will probably have to renounce hangouts and hobbies for at least 3 weeks. Would you do it?
- 3 - Tomorrow you will have an important examination and now you should review your material, but a friend of yours calls you and invites you to a nice party. Do you accept his invitation?
- 4 - You enrolled in an aerobics course in order to improve your physical performances; the course will last 4 months and it will be very challenging. Will you attend all lessons?
- 5 - When you take a pondered, but also painful decision, do you carry it out anyway?
- 6 - It's important to resist temptation. Do you agree?
- 7 - You noticed a school course that could boost your career, but it's very demanding and you have to attend all of the classes. Do you think that you will be able to do it?
- 8 - They diagnosed you a particular pollen allergy; they also prescribed you some pills to take every day for three months. These pills have unpleasant side effects. Are you going to take them anyway?
- 9 - If a dear person contracted a degenerative illness, time and money permitting, do you think that you would take care of him/her?
- 10 - Would you be able to remain faithful to your partner during a long absence, let's say six months?
- 11 - Better an egg today than a hen tomorrow. Do you agree?

If you really wish to succeed in exercising your will over your desires, you can. Resist temptations, and when faced with them be strong - do not be a weakling – say “NO”!

TIP OF THE WEEK: A recent study has linked sleep disturbance, such as taking a long time to fall asleep, frequent awakenings during the night, tossing and turning, or waking up too early, to thoughts of suicide. The most dangerous disturbance is waking up early, for this can lead to the doubling of the suicide rate. If this is an issue in your life, it might be wise to talk with your family physician or with a trusted mental health practitioner to try to get at the root of the problem and then to try to deal with the causes (rather than just hiding the problem by being drugged to sleep, which is not an effective long term solution).