



Illustration: Igor Saktor

Willpower is best used with care

Cordelia Fine

June 14, 2006

A DECADE ago when I was an undergraduate psychologist, a departmental librarian called Anne was doing something any psychologist would say was impossible. Every year, with near-perfect accuracy, she would predict which third-year undergraduates would be awarded first-class degrees.

Anne didn't know how their essays were rated, what A-level grades they had under their belts, or how they scored on IQ tests. (All information many would say was essential to forecasting final results.)

All she knew was how often she had seen students in the department library: reading course notes, photocopying journals, borrowing books. And the handful of students who Anne saw a lot - conspicuously more often than the other students in the same year - were going to get a first.

Anne was working on the principle that in academic achievement it is self-discipline, not talent, that counts. Ten years on, a study published recently in *Psychological Science* has come to exactly the same conclusion.

Psychologists Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman descended on the eighth grade of a large public school in the northeast of the US. As the autumn leaves fell, each of the 160-odd children took an IQ test, then they (and their parents and teachers) answered questionnaires that probed self-control. Are you good at resisting temptation, they were asked. Can you work effectively towards long-term goals? Or do pleasure and fun sometimes keep you from getting work done?

The children were also given a real-life test of their ability to delay gratification. Each was handed a dollar bill in an envelope. They could choose either to keep it or hand it back and get \$2 a week later. Their decision was carefully recorded.

The researchers returned in spring. They took note of each child's grades and then looked back to

see both how clever, and how self-controlled, that student had been in autumn. What, they wanted to know, was the most important factor in school grades?

The psychologists discovered it was self-control, by a long shot. A child's capacity for self-discipline was about twice as important as his or her IQ when it came to predicting academic success.

At first glance, research of this sort is a comfort to those of us not exploding with raw talent. The science seems to back up the writer Kingsley Amis's well-known advice that "the art of writing is the art of applying the seat of one's trousers to the seat of one's chair". Why, in that case anyone can write a book. Yet a small problem remains; namely, the problem of keeping the seat of one's trousers applied to the seat of one's chair.

Amis kept to an "unflinching schedule" of 500 words a day, according to The Guardian. (No doubt the young Amis would have returned the seductive single dollar bill to the researcher with barely a hesitation.) But just as we all have different levels of physical endurance so, too, do we differ in the strength of our will.

Some people are simply more susceptible to temptations and distractions, and we all sometimes reach the limits of our willpower sooner than we would like. "Programs that build self-discipline may be the royal road to building academic achievement," psychologists Duckworth and Seligman conclude from their findings.

So what can we do to strengthen self-discipline, to transform ourselves from impulsive dollar-snatchers to lofty long-term investors in future success?

Help lies in seeing willpower as a muscle, recent research suggests. The "moral muscle", as it has been called, powers all of the difficult and taxing mental tasks that you set yourself. It is the moral muscle that is flexing and straining as you keep attention focused on a dry academic article, bite back an angry retort to your boss, or decline a helping of your favourite dessert. And herein lies the problem: these acts of restraint all drain the same pool of mental reserves.

Take, for example, a group of hungry volunteers who were left alone in a room containing both a tempting platter of freshly baked chocolate chip biscuits and a plate piled high with radishes. Some of the volunteers were asked to sample only the radishes. These peckish volunteers manfully resisted the temptation of the biscuits and ate the prescribed number of radishes. Other, more fortunate, volunteers were asked to sample the biscuits.

In the next, supposedly unrelated, part of the experiment, the volunteers were asked to try to solve a difficult puzzle. The researchers weren't interested in whether the volunteers solved it. (In fact, it was insoluble.) Rather, they wanted to know how long the volunteers would persist with it. Their self-control already depleted, volunteers forced to snack on radishes persisted for less than half as long as people who had eaten the biscuits or (in case you should think chocolate biscuits offer inner strength) other volunteers who had skipped the eating part of the experiment.

As this and many similar studies show, if you draw on your reserves to achieve one unappealing goal - going for a jog, say - your moral muscle will be ineffective when you then call on it to help you switch off the television and start essay-writing.

What, then, can we do about this unfortunate tendency of the moral muscle to become fatigued with use? One option is to build it up and make it strong. Evidence is starting to accumulate that

the moral muscle, like its physical counterpart, can become taut and bulging from regular exercise. People asked by experimenters to be self-disciplined about their posture for two weeks were afterwards stronger willed when it came to a test of physical endurance, compared with other people allowed to slouch about in their usual comfortable way during the fortnight.

By regularly exercising self-restraint and virtue in all areas of life (moral muscle cross-training, we may call it), we will come to resist temptations with the same casual ease with which a world-class athlete sprints to catch a train. That, at least, is the idea.

Unfortunately, like any sensible, long-term strategy for self-improvement, this approach has limited appeal. For just as we want to fit into those trousers next Monday - not after eight tedious weeks of healthy eating and regular exercise - it is often the same for our more cerebral ambitions. Exam dates are set in stone, deadlines loom on the horizon, or may even mock us from the past. In other words, there simply may not be enough time to become a master of temperance and virtue before tackling our goal.

Fortunately, there is also an attractive quick-fix approach to the problem of limited willpower. This is to use your moral muscle only very sparingly. My father, a professional philosopher, has a job that involves thinking very hard about very difficult things. This, of course, is an activity that consumes mental resources at a terrific rate.

The secret of his success as an academic, I am now convinced, is to ensure that none of his precious brainpower is wasted on other, less important matters. He feels the urge to sample a delicious luxury chocolate? He pops one in his mouth. Pulling on yesterday's shirt less trouble than finding a clean one? Over his head the stale garment goes. Rather fancies sitting in a comfy armchair instead of taking a brisk jog around the park? Comfy armchair it is. Thanks to its five-star treatment, my father's willpower - rested and restored whenever possible - can take on the search for wisdom with the strength of 10 men.

Although we may not all be able to live the charmed life of the well-paid scholar, the general principle - not to spread our inner resolve too thin - is an important one. If you are about to embark on a big project you court disaster if at the same time your life is cluttered and demanding, or you also commit to draining attempts at self-enhancement. The would-be novelist whose taxing day job exhausts her moral muscle will find it harder to apply the seat of her trousers to the seat of her chair. The dieting philosopher will struggle to keep his attention on a tricky passage of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Where are the students whose self-discipline is constantly worn away by other concerns? Not in the library reading course-notes, photocopying articles or borrowing books. And if they are relying on their smarts to get them to the top of the class then there will be disappointment ahead.

But don't just take my word for it. Ask a librarian.

Cordelia Fine is a research fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne.

[Print Friendly Version](#) [Email this story](#)

[Privacy Terms](#) © The Australian

In this section

[Monash defends company losses](#)

[A lighter hand on the leading rein](#)

[Better business, uni links needed](#)

[Calls for care on Bologna](#)

[Company in student fee scandal faces VSU debt](#)

[Courses that suit to a T](#)

[His literary legacy justifies ode to Joyce](#)

[Inventor finetunes a winning concept](#)

[Lid lifted on sleep studies](#)

[Mixed audit for watchdog](#)

[On a collision course](#)

[Willpower is best used with care](#)
