

Willpower and the midnight scavenger



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Early one morning, Katy looks in the refrigerator for her leftover dessert only to realize it has disappeared. This was difficult to understand because she had seen it the night before.

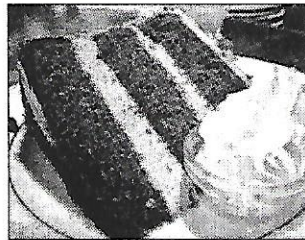
When she told her father, he was not surprised. He described a similar event that happened to him just the previous week when he noticed his chocolate was gone.

Laughing they both realized that it was Katy's mother who was the culprit. Often late in

the evenings she would get some food craving, typically for chocolate, and lacked the willpower to avoid it. Katy and her father coined her "the midnight scavenger."

Katy's mother, like many, was able to maintain willpower throughout the day, yet by day's end could not manifest self control. Dr. Roy Baumeister calls this process ego-depletion. Ego-depletion refers "to the state of depleted willpower," which can occur following a long day or many days of making numerous difficult decisions.

It is likely that we have all experienced this phenomenon, if not based on diet, maybe exercise. Often people



COURTESY PHOTO/STOCK XCHNG
Sometimes that chocolate cake really is too hard to resist.

will choose to exercise early in the morning because they realize that after a pressured day at work they are apt to dissuade themselves from engaging in exercise. Too many stressful decisions can result in ego-depletion or lack of willpower. In one study,

Baumeister and Hoffman found "that as people depleted their willpower they became increasingly likely to give in to desires they might otherwise have resisted."

Usually, we become disappointed in ourselves when we are unable to maintain control. For example, when we lose control of our emotions, especially anger. Moms of preschool children will confess to being short or yelling at their kids when they are feeling overextended at the end of day. Historically, this was defined as the "witching hour" when both mom and children had "melt downs." However

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for moms, often this evolves into being angry at themselves for not maintaining self control.

Having willpower or self control is valued highly by most people. It symbolizes personal strength. As a whole, we not only want to be the best we can, but we perceive self control as a way to manage our lives. So, how can we improve our willpower? According to Baumeister's research, the average person exerts three to four hours resisting desires or temptations each day. These decisions combined with others naturally become wearing. His findings suggest improving willpower by physical replenishing our brain and practicing new behaviors can help.

The first finding is the importance of restoring glucose. The brain and other parts of the body rely on glucose for energy and it takes energy to keep making decisions. Since constant acts of self control decreases glucose, replenishing it is helpful to the brain. Baumeister reports that a glass of lemonade can be sufficient to remedy self control performance.

The second way to improve self control is to practice it. Purposefully practicing for two weeks in some extra self control activity can improve it. These activities can range from something inconsequential to having an impact on daily living. Examples of the latter are tracking your food intake or wearing a pedometer daily to determine the distance you walk.

So, what should the midnight scavenger do? Late at night she obviously lacks the will power

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she's able to exert throughout the day. Given she knows she will likely get hungry, she can prepare and plan. She can buy snacks that she will enjoy and, she can prepare them so that they are easily available when she is too tired to do the preparations late at night. Over time the planning and preparation practice will become automatic. Eventually, the midnight scavenger will choose her own snacks.

Another obvious solution for the midnight scavenger is to practice going to bed earlier. Although this may be difficult, it is guilt free, healthy and the least expensive. In time, this can also become automatic.

Research by Dr. Roy Baumeister in the January 2012 APA Monitor, "The Power of Self Control" by Kristen Weirs.

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