There’s a dark side to self-control. Here’s why you should loosen up

Willpower is the secret of success – or so we’ve been told. But too much can be bad for the body and mind. The trick is to know when to give in to temptation.

By David Robson

THE Cookie Monster in Sesame Street isn’t known for his self-restraint, but in 2013 the swivel-eyed biscuit fiend experienced a remarkable transformation. Over a series of episodes, he learned to curb his cravings and avoid eating every cookie he saw in an attempt to gain entry to the Cookie Connoisseurs Club. “Me want it (but me wait)” is how Cookie Monster described his dilemma in a catchy musical number.

Parents of young viewers may have sensed this storyline had a purpose. It was an attempt to tap into the latest research on self-control, which has been linked to many aspects of success in life. Some argue that it is as important as IQ. Besides inspiring various educational initiatives – including the 44th season of Sesame Street – these findings have spawned numerous media articles and self-help books. “We are surrounded by messages that more self-control is better and that there basically could not be enough self-control,” says Liad Uziel at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.
is no doubt it has benefits, but too much of it can leave you open to exploitation and undermine both your physical and mental well-being. This presents something of a dilemma for the latest educational reforms – and indeed for anyone on the road to self-improvement. Fortunately, the findings also hold lessons for us all about when to wield our rod of iron and when it might be better to cut ourselves some slack.

Much of our current understanding of self-control stems from the work of psychologist Walter Mischel (who was also the scientific consultant behind Cookie Monster’s transformation). Beginning in the 1960s, Mischel’s studies presented children with a tray of tasty treats, including marshmallows. The kids were given two options: they could either eat one treat immediately, or wait for a few minutes while the researcher left the room to run an errand and then have two. Years later, the children who “delayed gratification” scored better on their SAT college entrance exams, were less likely to smoke, take drugs or become obese and were less physically aggressive.

**Beyond marshmallows**

Such delayed gratification is one form of self-control, but there are more. In psychology, the term describes a variety of behaviours that help us modify our immediate actions in the pursuit of long-term goals. That might mean inhibiting unwanted emotions (so you don’t shout at your boss during a disagreement), resisting distractions (like Facebook) or persevering with difficult problems. We can measure these aspects in various ways, from behavioural tasks to personality tests, but correlations between them suggest that they share common underlying mechanisms.

Admittedly, a few results haven’t been replicated, with a recent experiment finding that the benefits of acing the marshmallow test are less pronounced than Mischel’s results suggested. Nevertheless, the consensus is still that self-control holds sway over everything from professional and relationship success to the risk of landing in jail.

Given the obvious benefits, the finding that self-control can grow with practice and generalises across many domains was welcome news. Simply correcting posture or deliberately avoiding slang speech, for instance, can strengthen self-control and increase students’ persistence during difficult academic work. In another study, smokers who gave up sweets – a test of willpower – were also more likely to quit cigarettes. A recent meta-analysis has confirmed these effects. What’s more, while previous studies suggested that self-control is temporarily depleted by overexertion, more recent research indicates that it is essentially unlimited.

It is little wonder that these findings caught the eye of educational reformers. In the US, the Knowledge is Power Program was one of the first to
all areas of their lives. For example, they are encouraged to maintain eye contact with whoever is speaking in the classroom, and to count backwards from 100 during playground arguments instead of getting into a fight. The UK government has also been looking into applying the self-control research in schools.

What’s not to like? The problem, says Uziel, is that we haven’t explored whether you can have too much of a good thing. In 2014, his own research was among the first to indicate this might be the case. Self-control is generally thought to promote positive social behaviour, but Uziel found the opposite to be so, in people who aren’t that concerned about the approval of others. In a series of economic games, such individuals acted more selfishly than others – particularly if they felt their actions were private, without consequences for their reputation. In the real world, it is easy to imagine how this might be reflected in cases of fraud, for instance, which don’t tend to be the result of immediate impulses but instead require steady dedication and organisation. “Self-control is a tool, a mental instrument,” says Uziel. “And like any other tool, it can serve problematic causes.”

“Self-control interacts with other personal traits, with very different results”

Recent work shows another potential dark-side to self-control – it can amplify your moral sensibilities, for better or worse. Thomas Denson at the University of New South Wales, Australia, first asked students to complete
intervention that had previously been shown to increase self-control. He also measured their feelings of “moral responsibility” using a questionnaire. Then Denson called the students into his lab and gave them glass vials containing 20 cricket nymphs, along with a modified coffee grinder, which he called the “extermination machine”. Their task was simple: to feed the bugs into the grinder. (In reality, the bugs could escape through an emergency exit.)

For people with a strong sense of moral responsibility, the lessons in self-control helped them resist the experimenters’ orders. But the exact opposite was true for the more amoral students, who tipped about 50 per cent more nymphs into the grinder than people in a control group. Perhaps their greater self-control made them more obedient, or perhaps it allowed them to inhibit feelings of disgust as they fed the bugs into the machine. Whatever the reason, the findings indicate that self-control interacts with other personal traits to promote very different kinds of behaviours. “It can be used by heroes and villains alike,” says Denson.

**Taken for granted**

What’s more, the greater obedience associated with high self-control may be damaging for oneself as well as others. People with high self-control report feeling less satisfied with their partners and colleagues, believing that others take advantage of their dependability. It seems that we are so used to seeing them quietly persevere, we forget the personal sacrifices they are making – a perception borne out in research by Christy Zhou Koval at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

In 2015, while she was at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, Koval asked volunteers to read anecdotes about potential colleagues and then estimate their work performance in various tasks. She found that small cues indicating high self-control (whether someone flosses their teeth, for instance) prompted volunteers to allocate them more work, while also underestimating the effort they would need to put in to complete the work. The assumption, it seemed, was that someone with high self-control could simply “get on with it”. Koval says she has witnessed many friends and colleagues who have been taken advantage of in this way. “They become a repository for other people’s goal pursuits,” she says.

People with high self-control may take less pleasure in their own achievements, too. Research suggests that they have slightly muted responses to both positive and negative emotion, perhaps because they automatically inhibit any strong feelings. Mark Muraven at the State University of New York at Albany, who conducted one such study, emphasises that the effect is quite small, but it is still enough to take the edge off a good time. “They’re missing out on some part of the human
And it gets worse. In the long run, high self-control can be a source of regret.

One study asked alumni from Columbia University to reflect on their winter break 40 years previously, and compared their responses with the reflections of current students who had just finished their holiday. The youngsters were more likely to feel guilty about missing their studies, while the alumni resented having studied too much instead of partying and travelling. Rather than feeling pride in their achievements, most wished that they had exercised less self-control, not more.

“In the long run, high self-control can be a source of regret rather than pride”

Perhaps the most troubling finding, however, comes from a survey of nearly 700 African American families from poor neighbourhoods. In line with much of the previous research, teachers’ assessments of children’s self-control predicted many later outcomes: those scoring highly were more likely to enter college, for instance. Yet they also had high blood pressure and showed elevated levels of hormones commonly associated with stress.

Further analyses revealed that their background was the key. If you come from a richer family, high self-control improves your health by encouraging more salubrious behaviours. But if you lack resources, the stresses of overcoming life’s existing obstacles appear to outweigh the benefits of these healthier behaviours. So, for these children, higher self-control is linked with lower rates of depression and substance abuse, but the accelerated cellular ageing associated with exerting self-control affects their health.

In light of all this, Uziel thinks that we should be more cautious before applying some of the well-publicised findings – particularly in education. “We need to consider their long-term implications – not only in terms of achievement but also in terms of their effect on the children’s overall well-being and health,” he says. At the very least, programmes designed to boost self-control should offer greater support to help children cope with those additional stresses. But Uziel is also keen on using so-called nudge techniques to improve behaviour without the need for self-control. He notes that people with low self-control are more susceptible to conformity – so, for example, simply telling them that a healthy diet is in fashion means they are more likely to eat better.

For anyone else hoping to exercise self-discipline, the conclusions are a bit more nuanced. No one would suggest that we should lose all inhibition, but we might want to question when and how we apply self-restraint. Given the regrets of those Columbia alumni, for instance, you might decide to reassess your long-term goals and whether the efforts you are putting in today will pay the dividends you hope. As Uziel points out, people with high self-
empty windows in your diary that allow greater spontaneity and indulgence (see “A lazy path to self-control”).

At work, meanwhile, this research might encourage you to manage the expectations of others. “It could be beneficial for high self-control individuals to talk about their challenges and not just bottle up all the feelings of burden and dissatisfaction,” says Koval. Maybe deliberately let your standards drop, once in a while – just to let others know that you are human.

These are small steps, but Uziel believes they are a necessary corrective to some of the more puritanical interpretations of research into self-control. Ultimately, he says, we should remember that self-control is merely a tool to help us get what we want from life – and we should learn to recognise when it would be wiser not to wield it. Sometimes you need to curb your impulses. Other times, why not just let your inner Cookie Monster prevail?

### A lazy path to self-control

When asked about the secret to her success, writer Zadie Smith describes how she arranges her environment so there simply aren’t any distractions. Between 10 am and 2.30 pm, she disconnects her computer from the internet and devotes herself solely to her work.

Self-control is often seen as hard work and Smith’s approach may seem like cheating, but it turns out that she is in good company. People with naturally high levels of self-control are generally better at inhibiting their impulses and ignoring distractions. However, in a recent study, Roy Baumeister at Florida State University found that they don’t tend to exercise these skills very often, instead preferring to take measures to avoid temptations altogether. When working, for instance, they tend to move to distraction-free rooms, just as Smith describes.

There is a lesson for us all here. Such avoidance strategies may be less tiring than constantly trying to resist temptations. Crucially, if you arrange your schedule in the right way, you can then make time for both focused work and guilt-free pleasure – allowing yourself to build discipline without sacrificing flexibility and spontaneity, which are often lost in people with high self-control (see main story). It’s all about finding the balance.

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