

UNRAVELING THE MYTH OF WILLPOWER

The power to make real change and maintain real change
is well within your grasp.

by Warren L. Huberman, PhD.

I've always despised the term "willpower" because it is one of those words that seems to say something, but says nothing at all. Applied to weight loss or keeping weight off, willpower is always cited as something you must have to be successful. When a person struggles to lose weight, they tell me it's because they have no willpower. Willpower is spoken of as if it is the secret weapon in the battle of the bulge but nobody seems to be able to define what willpower is or how to acquire it. What is most bothersome is that willpower is often defined as something intrinsic...that you either have it or you don't, and if you don't...you're done for. This is utter nonsense.

Anyone who has ever lost a significant amount of weight can recall at least one moment when they thought to themselves: "This is it! This is the time that I'm really going to keep it off for good!" You felt as if you were in a groove and on autopilot. You turned away from cake and potato chips without much effort. You said no to second helpings as if you wouldn't even consider it! You were invincible! You even bought the smaller sized jeans to punctuate your accomplishment! But then there was a wedding, or a cruise, or just a little, harmless piece of chocolate cake that you let yourself enjoy. Suddenly, your "willpower" seemed to be gone and you didn't know how to get it back. Well...that ends today.

I have news for you. Successful weight losers do not have more willpower than you do. Unsuccessful dieters do not have less willpower than you do. The popular conception of willpower is nonsense. There is nothing magical about willpower. It is not something that you have one day and lose the next. I'm going to teach you how to make your own willpower. First, let's expose the myth of willpower.

WILLPOWER found!

When you lost all that weight way back when, it began with a conscious decision and a few key factors that lined up in your favor. While it may seem that you suddenly had the willpower to start the diet and successfully begin to lose weight, what actually occurred was that a wave of emotion (motivation) and an awareness of the positive and negative consequences of weight loss came together at the same time. Often by chance, the emotional energy to persevere is so strong that we tolerate hunger, frustration, cravings, etc. You might think that you were not feeling hunger, cravings, or frustration when you were losing the weight, but in fact, you were. They were simply dwarfed by the high level of emotion and motivation you had to tolerate them.

WILLPOWER lost!

Unfortunately, this initial emotional thrust that allows you to initiate the diet eventually wears off if there's nothing else to give it more fuel. When willpower seems to suddenly disappear, what actually happened is that the equation has changed. The initial wave of emotion that initiates a new pattern of behavior is beginning to dwindle. Reasons to eat the chocolate cake and the desire to eat it are suddenly greater than the initial emotional thrust to tolerate the discomfort of turning away. At this point, you begin giving yourself permission to go off track. You find yourself in an environment where temptations seem greater than before and your willpower seems to be waning. You hear yourself telling yourself things that trigger a setback.

"Oh come on...it's just one piece of cake...it's only 150 calories."

"I deserve a little treat...I've been good for so long."

"I should be able to eat some cake just like everyone else!"

WILLPOWER

Willpower didn't go anywhere. And, as you may recall, from that point on, it felt like it was only a matter of time until all the weight lost returned. You probably remember that awful feeling of powerlessness that you couldn't grab hold of the reins and turn things around. It was as if the cake seemed 100% more tempting than before. To be fair, there are also times where an overwhelming emotional event occurs that throws your motivation and willpower out of the window. For example...following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, many diets were broken, many ex-smokers resumed smoking, and many other behavioral resolutions fell by the wayside.

Making your own WILLPOWER

Modern medical science has begun to identify some differences between successful dieters and unsuccessful dieters. It is only a matter of time before we discover specific differences in chemical markers such as hormones and neurotransmitters between successful and unsuccessful dieters. However, what we already know, and what is unlikely to change, is that there are significant differences in the BEHAVIOR of successful and unsuccessful dieters. Interestingly, we may find that the differences in the behavior between successful and unsuccessful dieters may actually be responsible for the chemical differences they someday discover. In other words, it is more likely that we discover that the behavior of successful dieters has altered their brain chemistry rather than the converse.

We are going to find that making sustained behavior change, changes your brain in such a way that enables you to make your own willpower and that it is not something you are either born with or lack entirely. In fact, you know this already, these changes in brain chemistry, as a result of sustained behavior change, are probably why it became easy for you to turn away from the cakes and cookies for awhile (willpower) when you dieted successfully in the past.

TAKE ACTION

Whether it is losing weight, quitting smoking, or accomplishing any other endeavor, there are a few specific actions that successful people take that make them more successful.

1. CREATE MEASURABLE GOALS AND WRITE THEM DOWN. Successful people have a focused plan of action. Most successful business people have a written business plan. If you're in the business of losing weight, you should have a written plan of action. I hear some folks saying, "I hate writing things down." Consider that if you're not willing to write your goals down then you may not be ready to start on a plan of action. If you believe that you are, write your goals down! Keep reading your goals every day or they won't stay in the front of your mind, which is where they need to be when your desire to stray becomes stronger. If your goals are not in the front of your mind, they're in the back of your mind. If they're in the back of your mind, they're useless.

2. MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO ACCOMPLISH EACH GOAL. Ask yourself, "What's in it for me (WIIFM) to accomplish this goal?" Then ask yourself, "What is the consequence of failing to accomplish this goal?" Identify short- and long-term goals as well as short- and long-term consequences. "What do I achieve by losing this weight?" "What do I stand to lose or not achieve by failing to lose this weight?" Don't dance around this issue, be honest. There are real negative short-term consequences of dieting and keeping weight off. Hunger, feelings of deprivation and temporary emotional distress are a few. Fear of being without food as a comfort is another. Having a clear list of

benefits that you will gain in the future in exchange for tolerating these negative consequences in the short-term can help you through these tough times. Ask yourself, "What do I stand to gain, both now (within a few days) and in the future if I stick to my goal of losing weight?" This is perhaps the real definition of willpower: being able to tolerate frustration or discomfort in the present in exchange for a desirable outcome in the future. Perhaps a better phrase for willpower is discomfort tolerance or frustration tolerance. Take your time with this step. Remember, in order to have the ability to tolerate frustration and discomfort when they strike, you need to be acutely aware of "what's in it for me?"

3. MAKE CLEAR ACTION STEPS THAT YOU PLAN TO TAKE TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOAL. The goal itself is not as important as understanding the behavioral steps you plan to take in order to accomplish the goal. Ask yourself, "What specifically do I need to do to accomplish my goal?" Also ask, "What do I need to stop doing or do differently if I am to accomplish this goal?" Think of specific, measurable behaviors. For example, don't ask yourself "How am I going to find the time to exercise?" Ask yourself, "How am I going to make the time to exercise." Then take out your blackberry or schedule book and figure out exactly what activities you are going to shift around to create the time to exercise.

4. PRACTICE YOUR STRATEGIES. Did you ever notice that the best athletes practice almost EVERY DAY?! Think of baseball players. There is spring training and then, during the season, players participate in batting practice before every single game. Basketball players practice shooting before every single game. Starting to get the picture? Practice is what makes people successful in achieving their goals, not willpower. Perhaps you're telling yourself that it's the money that drives these athletes. You are mistaken. There are plenty of highly paid athletes that don't give it their all and we tend to dislike these individuals. These are the ones you read about in the media all the time. In general, our favorite athletes are the ones that practice the most. They try harder and give it that little extra. We tend to like the players who, despite being a bit shorter,

slower, injured, or older simply refuse to give up. It is putting in a constant effort and refusing to quit, not just talent that makes the difference in becoming a winner.

5. MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS TOWARDS THE GOAL. It has been demonstrated over and over again, in study after study, that successful dieters closely monitor their behavior and their progress towards their goals. In other words, they document what they eat and they weigh themselves regularly. It may not matter whether you track the foods you ate, the quantity eaten or the total number of daily calories you consume. Similarly, how often you should weigh yourself is still up for debate. What is not in question is that you must monitor your behavior and your weight to keep you on track in pursuit of your weight loss goal. With the growing number of easy to use online weight loss tools and smart phone applications, there's really no excuse to skip this important step.

6. THINK LIKE A WINNER. When a winner has a setback, they don't pack it in and quit. They start over. Don't "catastrophize." Don't categorize everything into good or bad, pass or fail. To be successful, you need to avoid being critical and demeaning of your shortcomings and missteps. If you've ever tried to lose weight before, here is a scenario that you probably can recognize. Let's say that you eat too much at a Chinese buffet on a Friday evening. If you over-eat one meal at the Chinese buffet, it's just one high-calorie meal. It doesn't mean a thing... unless you tell yourself it does. If you tell yourself that you have "ruined the day," suddenly it becomes a bad day. Here's the problem with exaggerating the magnitude of your one high-calorie meal. By telling yourself that you've "ruined the whole day" it is increasingly likely that you will tell yourself that your Chinese meal has "ruined the whole weekend." In doing so, you're setting yourself up to tell yourself: "Well I've ruined the weekend so I might as well just have some fun over the weekend and I'll get back on track on Monday." Now, you have given yourself permission to eat whatever you want all weekend long promising that you'll get back on track on Monday, only Monday never comes. Irrational thoughts lead to irrational behavior. How you think is everything.

There you have it...the mystery of willpower unraveled. The power to make real change and maintain real change is well within your grasp. You don't suddenly get the power and just as quickly lose that power. Make a commitment to your goals, write them down, document what's in it for you to succeed or fail, read your goals daily, diligently engage in behaviors that support each goal, monitor your behavior and progress towards the goal, think like a winner and you will likely be successful. I know that some of you are reading this and sighing, saying that it's not so simple. You're right...it's not. But, it doesn't have to be so complicated either. Think of the steps

outlined above as the blueprint for success. Take a bold step. Start writing some goals down right now and follow the steps I've outlined above before you log off. You have the power to change right at this very moment. And if you do...willpower will follow! ●



about dr. huberman...

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