

The Six Secrets of Self-Control

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

What is it about self-control that makes it so difficult to rely on? Self-control is a skill we all possess (honest); yet we tend to give ourselves little credit for it. Self-control is so fleeting for most that when Martin Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania surveyed two million people and asked them to rank order their strengths in 24 different skills, self-control ended up in the very bottom slot.

Watch Tommy Boy describe his struggle with self-control:



[Click on the image to view this clip.](#)

When it comes to self-control, it is so easy to focus on our failures that our successes tend to pale in comparison. And why shouldn't they? Self-control is an effort that's intended to help achieve a goal. Failing to control yourself is just that—a failure. If you're trying to avoid digging into that bag of chips after dinner because you want to lose a few pounds and you succeed Monday and Tuesday nights only to succumb to temptation on Wednesday by eating four servings' worth of the empty calories, your failure outweighs your success. You've taken two steps forward and four steps back.

With this success/failure dichotomy in mind, I give you six strategies for self-control that come straight from new research conducted at Florida State University. Some are obvious, others counterintuitive, but all will help you eliminate those pesky failures and ensure your efforts to boost your willpower are successful enough to keep you headed in the right direction for achieving your goals.

Self-Control Secret #1 – Meditate

Meditation actually trains your brain to become a self-control machine. Even simple techniques like mindfulness, which involves taking as little as five minutes a day to focus on nothing more than your breathing and your senses, improves your self-awareness and your brain's ability to resist destructive impulses. Buddhist monks appear calm and in control for a reason.

Self-Control Secret #2 – Eat

File this one in the counterintuitive category, especially if you're having trouble controlling your eating. Your brain burns heavily into your stores of glucose when attempting to exert self-control. If your blood sugar is low, you are far more likely to succumb to destructive impulses. Sugary foods spike your sugar levels quickly and leave you drained and vulnerable shortly thereafter. Eating something that provides a slow burn for your body, such as whole grain rice or meat, will give you a longer window of self-control. So, if you're having trouble keeping yourself out of the company candy bin when you're hungry, make sure you eat something else if you want to have a fighting chance.

Self-Control Secret #3 – Exercise

Getting your body moving for as little as 10 minutes releases GABA, a neurotransmitter that makes your brain feel soothed and keeps you in control of your impulses. If

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you're having trouble resisting the impulse to walk over to the office next door to let somebody have it, just keep on walking. You should have the impulse under control by the time you get back.

Self-Control Secret #4 – Sleep

When you are tired, your brain cells' ability to absorb glucose is highly diminished. As I explained in Secret #1, your brain's ability to control impulses is nil without glucose. What's worse, without enough sleep you are more likely to crave sugary snacks to compensate for low glucose levels. So, if you're trying to exert self-control over your eating, getting a good night's sleep—every night—is one of the best moves you can make.

Self-Control Secret #5 – Ride the Wave

Desire has a strong tendency to ebb and flow like the tide. When the impulse you need to control is strong, waiting out this wave of desire is usually enough to keep yourself in control. The rule of thumb here is to wait at least 10 minutes before succumbing to temptation. You'll often find that the great wave of desire is now little more than a ripple that you have the power to step right over.

Self-Control Secret #6 – Forgive Yourself

A vicious cycle of failing to control oneself followed by feeling intense self-hatred and disgust is common in attempts at self-control. These emotions typically lead to over-indulging in the offending behavior. When you slip up, it is critical that you forgive yourself and move on. Don't ignore how the mistake makes you feel; just don't wallow in it. Instead, shift your attention to what you're going to do to improve yourself in the future.

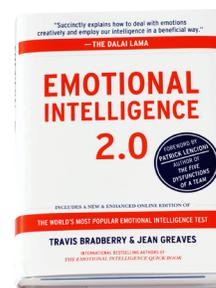
Putting These Strategies to Work

The important thing to remember is you have to give these strategies the opportunity to work. This means recognizing the moments where you are struggling with self-control and, rather than giving in to impulse, taking a look at the Six Secrets and giving them a go before you give in. 🕒 *January 2012*

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.



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