

[IMAGE]

Weight Loss 101: 6 Tips to Help Strengthen Your Willpower

By Jason Strotheide, DC

When you begin a weight-loss program, one of the first things you often think about is *willpower*. Will you be able to stick to your diet? Will you be able to deny yourself the foods you love? Will you be able to reach your weight-loss goals? You may even wonder if it is really possible to increase your willpower and self-control. The answer to all of the above is yes, and it starts with understanding willpower and how to increase it.

Willpower and the Brain

The tricky thing about willpower is that it is a response which comes from the body and the brain as a reaction to some type of internal conflict: eat the cookie or do not eat the cookie. You want to do one thing, but know or feel like you shouldn't; or the opposite: You know you are expected to do one thing, but you'd rather do something else.

The prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain right behind the forehead – helps us with decision-making and behavior regulation. Willpower, or self-control, is governed by this part of the brain since it falls under the heading of both decision-making and behavior.

To effectively make sound decisions and control urges, the prefrontal cortex needs to be placated. That means feeding it quality food so it has the energy required to perform its function; and getting enough sleep so it can maintain itself.

Willpower Throughout the Day

weight loss - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark One of the most often replicated findings pertaining to willpower is that it appears to be finite – we each only have so much of it and it runs out during the day as we need to use it. Controlling your temper, ignoring distractions, and turning down second helpings all use willpower and tap into the same source of strength.

We tend to view willpower as a muscle that can get exhausted the more it is used, but some researchers believe it is possible to train willpower and therefore strengthen it. The question is: how?

How Can You Increase Your Willpower? 6 Tips

Starting with the premise that we have a finite amount of willpower to use in one day, we also assume normal self-control and stress will deplete some of our willpower reserve. What are our options for increasing the willpower reserves we have at our disposal?

1. Learn how to manage stress. If you are constantly in high-stress situations, your body's energy can be used up by acting on instinct and making decisions that are based only on short-term outcomes. In these instances, our prefrontal cortex can't win the battle for the energy it needs to help you make better decisions. Often, these situations lead to "stress eating."

When you feel overwhelmed by a high-stress situation and tempted to reach for a food you should avoid, stop and take a few deep breaths. With practice, this can help you manage your stress level and improve your willpower, making it easier to choose a piece of fruit or some veggies instead.

2. Stick to Your Plan. Make a plan and stick to it. If you plan your meals, you'll be more likely to follow the plan. Self-affirmation is a proven strategy for building and maintaining self-control if you feel you are running out. To take back control of a situation, use the phrase, "I don't," instead of "I can't." This can help you stick to your plan and reach your weight-loss goal.

It works like this: When you tell yourself "I can't," you create a feedback loop that reminds you of your limitations. This phrase indicates that you are making yourself do something you don't want to do. So, try saying, "I don't," as in, "I don't eat between meals," to reinforce your new healthy habits.

3. Give Your Brain More Sleep. Getting enough sleep makes a huge difference in how efficiently your prefrontal cortex functions. Sleep deprivation – less than six hours a night – creates a kind of chronic stress that impairs how both your brain and your body use energy. The prefrontal cortex is hit especially hard in these instances and can lose control over the parts of your brain that create cravings and control the stress response.

In addition, if you don't get enough sleep, when your body needs energy, it will trigger hunger in order to use food to get the energy it needs. The recommended amount of sleep each night is six-and-a-half to

seven-and-a-half hours.

4. *Meditate.* In addition to improving attention, stress management, focus, and self-awareness, meditation can increase our willpower reserve. And you don't have to have practice meditation for years to receive this benefit – brain changes have been documented after two months of short, daily meditation.

5. *Exercise and Nutrition.* Another good way to train the brain, and one that is often undervalued and ignored, yet can help you become much more resistant to stress and boost willpower, is regular exercise. This includes relaxing, gentle exercising such as yoga or low-impact walking.

What you feed your body also affects how much energy the prefrontal cortex has to use. This makes nutrition an important factor. Not only will exercise and proper nutrition bump up your willpower, they also will make you feel better. When you feel better about yourself, you are less likely to reach for a snack or overeat at any given meal.

6. *Keep Your Focus.* When you are trying to break a bad habit or even build a new, better one, putting off something you really shouldn't have can be effective. If your self-talk includes, "Not now, but later," you are usually less tormented by the thought of things you trying to avoid, since you've given yourself approval to have it later. Later can be any time in the future, or you can decide "later" that you no longer want whatever it was you are trying to avoid.

These are just a few more tools to put in your toolbox for success when following a weight-loss program. By sticking to your plan and keeping stress at bay, you will be on your way to achieving your weight-loss goals.

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