

Exercise Success: Willpower Is Part of the Picture

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Call it what you want — commitment, determination, willpower or self-control — but you know it varies widely from person to person. It interacts with many factors, and contributes greatly to a person's success when it comes to lifestyle change.

"One of my clients has been extremely successful in sticking to his exercise program," your coworker muses. "He has so much determination; he keeps up his exercise program and is making good progress. Another client has come to see me a few times, but is always making excuses. I can't help comparing them. The two men are similar in so many ways, but their biggest difference is commitment. I guess you could also call it willpower."

Call it what you want --commitment, determination, willpower or self-control-- but you know it varies widely from person to person. It interacts with many factors, and contributes greatly to a person's success when it comes to lifestyle change.

The nature of self-control

Self-control refers to the control exerted by the self over thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Self-control is involved in making decisions and choices, initiating and inhibiting behavior, and making and carrying out plans. We use self-control when we forgo immediate pleasure (i.e., decide not to eat dessert) in order to obtain future benefits (like better health). Self-control allows us to examine and change habitual behavior. Hence, whenever we attempt to help clients implement behavior-change programs, clients' efforts at self-control help to determine their likelihood of success.

Some psychologists who study self-control believe it is a limited resource. In other words, each person has a finite amount of psychic energy available for the purposes of self-control. This notion of limitation helps explain why people who exercise early in the day are most likely to be successful: They have not yet expended time and energy overcoming the barriers that inevitably develop during the day. This concept of limitation also explains why dieters are most likely to overeat in the evening. After spending all day exerting self-control to resist temptation, their resolve wears down by the end of the day.

Stress can reduce energy for self-control

Self-control energy is expended more quickly when you are under stress, since you use self-control when you adapt to stress. You expend energy to change your behavior, thoughts and emotions. Coping with stress can leave you emotionally exhausted, and without the energy to get to your workout, or to resist the temptation to smoke or overeat. In fact, stress is the most common reason people slip up in their attempts to overcome addictions or change other habits. Part of the explanation for this may be that the demands placed upon these stressed-out people have exceeded their supply of self-control energy.

In addition to using up energy, stress also causes negative emotions, like anger and sadness. When people experience negative feelings, they look for ways to feel better. The need to overcome distress is perceived as more important than behaving in ways that may result in future benefits. So if you feel bad and you think eating some chocolate cake will make you feel better, you will eat the cake, even though you want to lose weight.

Self-control can increase client success

Fitness professionals are often guilty of designing behavior-change programs that look great on paper, but don't match the amount of energy clients are capable or willing to expend. This is partly because clients don't always understand what they can realistically take on, and they underestimate the time and energy an exercise program will require. To improve the success of your clients, try to help them maximize their motivation and self-control, while

reducing the self-control required by their exercise programs, by using the following suggestions:

Acknowledge that daily exercise requires time and energy. People who mentally prepare for the challenge of taking on a program of daily exercise are better able to summon the self-control required to make their programs work. Rather than telling clients that exercise is easy and effortless, prepare them for the work, as well as the rewards.

Let clients know they must make their exercise programs a priority. Unless people see daily exercise as a priority, other commitments will consume their time and energy.

Help clients make exercise a habit. Once exercise becomes a habitual routine, little self-control is required. Use the force of habit to increase exercise success.

Recommend exercise early in the day. Research shows that people who exercise first thing in the morning have the best adherence. Their goals have been accomplished before other demands eat up their time and wear away their self-control energy supply.

Increase exercise self-confidence with daily success. As clients become more confident in their abilities to stick to an exercise program, they will try harder to do so when obstacles arise. Start clients off with modest demands that they will really accomplish.

Help clients use exercise to reduce stress. Just as people can learn to overeat to reduce stress, they can also learn to exercise to reduce stress. Educate clients about the stress-reduction benefits of regular exercise. Exercise does three great things: It reduces stress, creates incentives to exercise and increases self-control energy.

Encourage social support. Less self-control is needed when control is supplemented by encouragement from others. Recommend exercising with a friend. Help clients set up environments and situations that require the least amount of self-control. If clients seem uncertain about their exercise environment, help them feel welcome and at home. FM

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