

How To Master **Self-Discipline**

Improving Life One Step At A Time



Self-discipline is the key to success. It is the force that helps us stay focused on our studies when we'd rather be partying. It's the force that keeps us going to the gym when the couch beckons. It's behind the determination to build the 147th prototype when the 146th version didn't work.

In other words, self-discipline is the quality that pushes us to complete the tasks we know we should do in order to achieve our goals, rather than give in to momentary distractions that take us off course.

Fortunately, self-discipline is a skill that can be learned, and improved, by anyone willing to try. By developing your sense of self-discipline, you can become healthier, achieve more in school and work, and reach your goals – whether you want to learn a language, master the guitar, climb a mountain, or just get out of the door on time in the morning.

The Benefits of Self-Discipline

Self-discipline, also known as self-control, is a quality that can help us make better choices in everything that we do. Studies show that self-discipline can help make us healthier, happier, and more successful throughout our lives. Here are just a few examples:

- Higher self-control in childhood results in better physical health as an adult.
- Teens with more self-discipline are less likely to use drugs or alcohol or indulge in risky sexual behaviors.
- Children with higher self-control do better in school.
- In a study spanning twenty years, children who had more self-control in school became adults with more career success.
- Employees with more self-control earn more and have higher status jobs than those with less self-control.
- Self-discipline increases happiness and wellbeing.
- People with more self-discipline report better relationships with their friends and family.

In short, the research is clear that self-discipline positively affects just about every aspect of life. Self-discipline is so beneficial because it helps us make better choices at every turn, in all areas of our lives.

Fortunately, self-discipline is a skill, not just an inborn quality, and anyone at any stage of life can improve their self-discipline and begin to reap the benefits.

How to Develop Your Self-Discipline

Just as there are many exercises in the gym that can strengthen your body, there are many exercises that can help you build self-discipline.

Luckily, the practice of self-discipline is self-reinforcing. As you build your focus and work steadily toward your goals, your sense of achievement will make it easier and easier to stay disciplined. The following list offers just a few of the ways that you can work to improve your self-discipline.

Set Clear Goals

Self-discipline is willingness to do the thing you should be doing. So, to improve it, first you need to decide what it is you should be doing. What are your goals? Whatever you want to achieve, start by writing it down as a SMART goal. A SMART goal is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely.

For example, let's say you want to get fit. That's a wonderful goal, but it's not SMART. How will you know when you are "fit"? How long will it take? How will you judge your progress?

In order to have a truly motivating goal, narrow it down. For instance, if your general aim is to get fit, a SMART goal might be: "I will run a 5 km race in three months." This goal is:

- Specific (a 5km race)
- Measurable (did you run the race or not?)
- Achievable (whereas running a marathon in three months would be too much)
- Timely (you'll do it in three months)

Now that you have a SMART goal, how your self-discipline will help you is clear. You'll need to complete your weekly training plan in order to meet your goal. Your self-discipline will be needed every time your schedule says you need to run, yet you are tired, or sore, or the weather's bad, or the TV is interesting.

Visualize Your Goals

One reason why humans struggle with self-discipline is because we tend to put a greater value on present enjoyment than on future accomplishments. So, we might wish to be fitter and healthier in three months, but then skip a run because it's raining and the couch is comfy.

One way to overcome this tendency is to clearly visualize the joy of reaching your goals. For example, when you sit down to study Spanish, summon a vision of sitting in a bar in Spain, talking and laughing with the locals. When it's cold and you don't want to go to

the gym, imagine the thrill of crossing the finish line of your race. When you struggle to concentrate on your presentation, imagine how good it will feel to watch your client sign the contract.

Whatever your goal is, the more clearly you can imagine how good it will feel to achieve it, the more you can bring your future joy into the present. This will make the hard work feel much easier.

Identify Weaknesses and Remove Temptations

Legend has it that French writer Victor Hugo was guilty of procrastinating while writing. When his publisher demanded he finish his long-overdue novel, he hit upon a unique method of forcing himself to work: he locked away his good clothes and wrapped himself up in just a grey knitted shawl.

Unwilling to let others see him in that state, he had no choice but to sit at his desk and get to work. As a result, he managed to write *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in just a few months. Whether true or not, this story illustrates an excellent method of strengthening your self-discipline – namely, avoiding temptation.

Many people imagine that self-discipline involves looking temptation squarely in the eye and saying no. However, temptation is, well, tempting. People with self-discipline aren't able to resist temptation with super-human strength. Instead, studies show that people who show the greatest levels of self-control have the fewest episodes of temptation. In other words, they organize their life so that they avoid running into temptations that might disrupt their goals.

For example, if Bob is trying to improve his diet, he might walk around the block to avoid passing his favorite bakery. If Jane knows that she'll lose hours to scrolling on social media if she picks up her phone at work, she'll lock her phone in a drawer when she gets to the office.

There are many ways to arrange your life in order to avoid temptation and encourage good behavior. To do this for yourself, first think of your goal. Then, identify two or three reasons why it's hard to achieve. Next, brainstorm ways to help reduce temptation and avoid distraction, so you can focus on achieving your goal. Here are some examples:

- If you want to cut down on social media use, install software on your computer that blocks access to particular sites during work hours, and delete social media apps on your phone.
- If you want to eat better, clean your cupboards of unhealthy foods, and buy only the groceries on your eating plan.
- If you struggle to stop hitting the snooze button, move your alarm clock across the room so you have to get up to turn it off.

- If it's too tempting to play games when you should be studying, lend your gaming console to a friend until exam period is over.

Reduce Decision Fatigue with Smart Habits

What do Mark Zuckerberg, Barack Obama and musician Adele have in common? The answer is, they all wear the same thing every day. Whether it's Zuckerberg's grey t-shirt, Obama's suits, or Adele's black dress, having a grab-and-go uniform means that's one less decision that they each have to make each day. That's important because studies show that making decisions is exhausting.

Just as there are only so many bicep curls a person can do, even the most self-disciplined person only has so much willpower each day. Making choices all day long slowly drains that willpower and after a while, decision fatigue sets in. Once we've exhausted our self-control for the day, we start making poor choices.

So, what's the cure for decision fatigue? It's to establish good habits. Once a behavior becomes habitual, we are no longer making a conscious decision to do it; we just do it automatically.

For example, do you make a conscious decision to brush your teeth each night? Or, do you just shuffle to the bathroom and start polishing those pearly whites on autopilot? If it's the latter, thank your parents. At some point in your childhood, they instilled that habit in you, and now you don't have to think about brushing your teeth. You just do it.

The more we can build habits that help make healthy behaviors automatic and streamline the number of decisions we make each day, the more willpower we conserve for when we really need it. For example:

- Establish a uniform. You don't need to wear just a grey t-shirt every day, but do try paring down your wardrobe choices to just a few outfits. You can also apply the same logic to other parts of your day: have a "usual" lunch order, a favorite parking spot, and so on. The fewer small choices you need to make, the more energy you have for the important stuff.
- Obey your schedule. Sit down once a week and schedule all of your most important tasks, whether at work or home. Then, you don't have to debate when to go to the gym, study for your test, or call your least-favorite client. Just do the next thing on the calendar.
- Piggyback on existing habits. When trying to establish a new habit, it's easier to build on something you already do than to start from scratch. For example, you probably brush your teeth every day without fail. So, if you need to start taking daily medication, put your pills right next to your toothbrush, and take them every day before you brush. Soon, taking your pills will be a habit.

- Be patient. As you seek to add new habits to streamline your day, it's important to be patient with yourself, and not take on too much change at once. It can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months for a new habit to stick. Pick just one habit to build and resist the temptation to add a new one until the first one is truly automatic.

Cultivate Gratitude

By definition, people who are self-disciplined are better able to ignore distractions and stay focused. And one surprising tool that can help you avoid distractions and stay on track is gratitude.

Why would gratitude help us stay focused, thus boosting our self-discipline? It's because gratitude makes us happier, which helps us focus.

Often when we seek distraction by eating, playing games, shopping online, scrolling through social media, and so on, we are trying to avoid feeling anxiety, worry, or another negative emotion. As it turns out, expressing gratitude is an effective way to lower negative emotions.

In one study, teens who were encouraged to write weekly gratitude letters reported lower levels of negative emotions during those weeks. During the same time period, those teens ate less junk food and more fruits and veggies than a control group who didn't practice gratitude. In other words, gratitude helped increase the teens' self-discipline by lowering negative emotions, making it easier to resist distraction and temptation.

To use gratitude to help build your self-discipline, simply spend a few minutes every week or even every day writing down things you are grateful for. It won't take long before the practice of gratitude lowers your stress and negativity, making it easier to focus on your long-term goals.

Practice Your Self-Discipline and Improve Your Life

Building your self-discipline can be hard. However, it's deeply rewarding. To illustrate this, here are several areas where applying more self-discipline will improve your health, wellbeing and happiness:

Eating Well

The old cliché is true: we are what we eat. By improving your diet, you can help prevent major diseases including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and several kinds of cancer. You will also have more energy and improved moods. A great place to start is

by assessing how close your current diet is to the USDA My Plate recommendations for healthy eating.

How to Get Started

To use your self-discipline to improve your eating, start small. Make one change at a time, and when that feels comfortable, make another change. Here are a few ideas to start with:

- Add one fruit or vegetable to each meal.
- Stop buying bulk packs of your favorite (unhealthy) snacks.
- Buy a good non-stick pan, and reduce the oil in every recipe.
- Cut your servings of red meat in half.
- Pick breads and cereals made with 100% whole grains, instead of ones made with white flour.

Exercise

Exercise can improve your mood, reduce your risk of serious illnesses, strengthen your body, and give you energy to get through the day. Exercise is even a fountain of youth: under a microscope, the cells of regular exercisers look younger than the cells of sedentary people.

Even though regular exercise is the closest thing we have to a magic cure-all, less than 20% of Americans get the recommended amount of exercise in a day. Guidelines suggest that adults should get at least 150 minutes of brisk movement (such as walking or riding a bike) each week. Beginning or increasing an exercise program will make you feel better, look better, and even think better, too.

As a bonus, exercise is also a way to boost your self-discipline. That's why employers like to hire athletes. Bosses know that people who can stick to a training plan know how to buckle down and get the job done.

How to Get Started

The human body was designed to move. All you need to do to become an exerciser is to pick an exercise you like and stick to it. To get started:

- Experiment with different workouts until you find one you enjoy.
- Work out with a friend, so you can motivate each other.
- Sign up for a walk, ride, or race, and let the approach of race day motivate you.

- Add a 10-15-minute walk to your schedule each day. When that gets easy, make it 20-30 minutes, or add a second short walk.

Get Organized

You don't need to be obsessed with Marie Kondo or Martha Stewart to recognize the benefits of a cleaner, more organized house. If your dishes are done, your laundry is folded, and your wallet and keys are sitting by the door, it's so much easier to get dressed, make breakfast and get out of the door in the morning. Once you get in the habit of keeping your home tidy, you'll find that you save more time by being organized than you spend cleaning.

How to Get Started

When it comes to cleaning, the idea of doing it is often much worse than the reality. Focus your self-discipline on getting started. Once you start, it's easy to finish. Here are some good habits to establish:

- Get the dishes done before you go to bed each night. Your mornings will be so much better.
- Once a day, set a timer for 10 minutes and get everyone in the house to tidy until the buzzer goes. If everyone puts their back into it, this should be about all you need to keep your home clean.
- Create a dedicated space for your keys, phone, wallet, and anything else you carry every day, and make a habit of always putting your belongings back in their spot.

Improve Your Focus at Work

Studies show that almost all employees waste at least some time at work each day. The amount of time wasted varies, with some employees wasting just a few minutes, while the worst offenders can waste three hours or more.

Think about your workday. How much time do you waste? What could you do with that extra time? If you were able to reduce your daily timewasters, you might be able to take on an additional project and finally get that promotion. Or, you might be able to finally leave on time, but still get just as much done. Whatever your goal, reducing wasted time at work helps you get there faster.

How to Get Started

Your first step is to identify your top timewasters. Track your time over a few days and see where you could be more efficient.

Note that time spent thinking about a project or building meaningful connections with colleagues is not necessarily time wasted. Sometimes wonderful ideas emerge out of casual conversations. In addition, there will always be a little slack in the day, and it's not possible to be 100% efficient at all times.

Once you have your list of timewasters, think of ways to reduce the temptation to indulge. These solutions will be personal to you and to your specific job. Then, decide on how you are going to spend all the time you've saved. Finally, enjoy the benefits that come from greater efficiency and focus on your work.

Conclusion

Self-discipline helps us stay focused on those things we know we should do for our long-term wellbeing. Whenever someone completes a marathon, earns a graduate degree, balances three jobs and childcare, or carefully manages a budget so that the month and the money end at the same time, they've used at least some self-discipline to get there.

By cultivating your self-discipline, you can improve your health, fitness, career performance and even happiness. Fortunately, self-discipline is available to all. All you need to start improving this important quality is the will to do so. It may not be easy to start with, but the more you practice the art of self-discipline, the more you will benefit.