

Willpower Experiment: A Tomorrow Just Like Today

Behavioral economist Howard Rachlin proposes an interesting trick for overcoming the problem of always starting a change tomorrow. When you want to change a behavior, aim to reduce the variability in your behavior, not the behavior itself. He has shown that smokers asked to try to smoke the same number of cigarettes every day gradually decrease their overall smoking – even when they are explicitly told not to try to smoke less. Rachlin argues that this works because the smokers are deprived of the usual cognitive crutch of pretending that tomorrow will be different. Every cigarette becomes not just one more smoked today, but one more smoked tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. This adds new weight to every cigarette, and makes it much harder to deny the health consequences of a single smoke.

Apply Rachlin’s advice to your own willpower challenge this week: Aim to reduce the variability of your behavior day to day. View every choice you make as a commitment to all future choices. So instead of asking, “Do I want to eat this candy bar now?” ask yourself, “Do I want the consequences of eating a candy bar every afternoon for the next year?” Or, if you’ve been putting something off that you know you should do, instead of asking “Would I rather do this today or tomorrow?” ask yourself, “Do I really want the consequences of always putting this off?”

Adapted from: *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works and Why it Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More* by Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.