

New Year Revolutions: Taking the fight to self-control



By [Chamendran Naidoo](#)

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It's a new year, my dear readers. A new year means a new diet, along with the other resolutions that find their way into our resolves with as much certainty as taxes and State of the Nation addresses. Just like the aforementioned annual customs (and in some cases *because of them*), the promises of the New Year rarely find themselves being followed through.

Whether you're trying to tighten up your loose bits in the gym or loosen up your tight bits at home, the scenario is often the same: New Year revelations sung from the highest burning-bush-bearing mountain often degrade throughout the year into a guerrilla warfare-like "New Year Revolution". We're not the government in this scenario, readers, we're the rebels and self-control is the capital city.

Why is it so hard to take 'control' of self-control?

Self-control/willpower has been studied extensively over the years, much to the pain of the carrot-on-a-stick-chasing test subjects. Humans are found to have a limited reservoir of self-control which is exhausted by constant exertion, similar to the fatigue experienced by a muscle.

One does however maintain a reserve of willpower, which, given the right motivation, one would be able to tap into. This is seen more in the scenario of holding your breath a little longer for a considerable sum of money, than merely swapping that caramel bear for a root. Unless, of course, said root could cure you, oh my reader, of leprosy.

Sticking with our muscle analogy, self-control can be strengthened with regular exercise. If you're imagining muscle-bound, speedo-clad Buddhist monks, you'd be weird... But correct. By exerting one's self-control on one aspect, one can enjoy increased willpower on other separate aspects.

For example, deciding to stick to a regular gym routine will make it easier for you to say no to unhealthy eating. Unfortunately though, the opposite finds itself true too. Skipping the gym for your favourite medical TV show on Friday, may have you enjoying your favourite pizza with it. So set the PVR and go sweat it out with your personal trainer. (No PVR? There's always the rerun on Thursday.)

Your angle of attack

First, throw that 'New Year Resolution' list out of the window. It's the worst method one can employ, leading to willpower depletion by having too many goals to focus on, as well as causing a knock-on effect. Second, look for the discarded list and make sure it finds itself into a recycle bin.

Instead of attacking multiple resolutions, focus on one goal at a time. Avoiding temptation has been proven to enhance self-control by keeping things "out of sight" and thus "out of mind". Another proven method of increasing one's willpower is referred to by Rorschach-wielding psychologist folk as "*implementation intention*".

Translated, this boils down to a series of "if/then" statements. For example, a fledgling non-smoker entering a social circle of smokers may want to come up with the following strategy before the encounter: "If I get offered a cigarette, then I shall reach for my bubblegum instead," or "if a fine young lady asks me for a light, then I shall use my non-smoking path as an ice-breaker". By having a plan in place, less willpower is used to remain on the straight and narrow.

Through daily use of self-control, one strengthens its metaphorical fibres to a point where less and less is required to resist/execute a given action. Eventually, one reaches a point where no self-control is required and a given action is assimilated as a habit that is done without thought. At this point, the cross-hairs should find their target on the next vice on list.

"And there's a hand my trusty friend! And give us a hand o' thine! And we'll take a right good-will draught, for auld lang syne!"

ABOUT CHAMENDRAN NAIDOO

Chamendran Naidoo works as a General Practitioner in the SA Navy. His interests include fine surgery as well as approaching the patient as a whole in a Bio-Psycho-Social manner. He is passionate about the immersion of medicine into everyday life which he actively manages via social media fronts. Chamendran is also a co-presenter on SABC3's Dr Mbl Show. Email Chamendran on chamendran@hotmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@Chamendran](https://twitter.com/Chamendran).

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