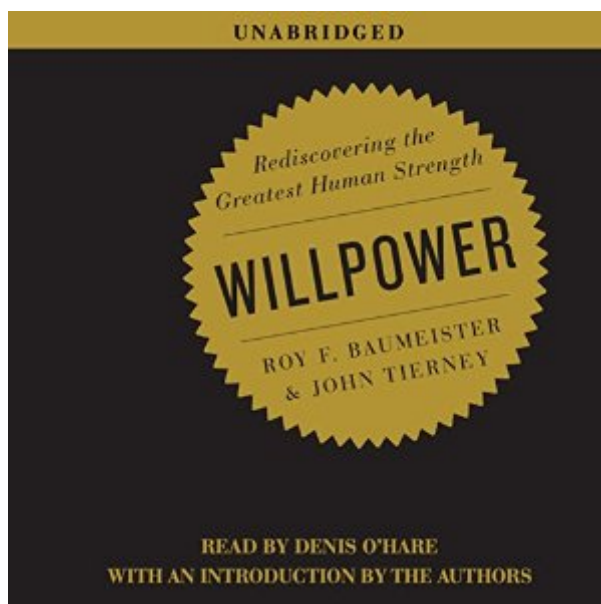


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# Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength



## Synopsis

For years, our concept of the self and well-being has been dominated by the notion of self-esteem, while the old fashioned value of willpower has been disparaged by psychologists who argued that we're largely driven by unconscious forces beyond our control. In *Willpower* Baumeister and Tierney turn this misinformation on its head to reveal self-control as arguably the single most powerful indicator of success. Baumeister discovered that willpower actually has a physical basis to it: it is like a muscle that can be strengthened with practice, and fatigued from overuse. That's why eating and sleeping - and especially failing to do either of those - have such dramatic effects on self-control. Yet, while self-control is biologically rooted, we have the capacity to manipulate our nature. *Willpower* features personal stories from entrepreneurs, executives, parents and children who have managed to do just that. The characters range from Victorian explorers to modern homemakers, from college students pulling all nighters to entertainers. The practical lessons in self-control conditioning they provide are nothing short of life changing. Combining the best of modern social science with the practical wisdom of David Allen, Ben Franklin, and others, Baumeister and Tierney here share the definitive compendium of modern lessons in willpower.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I have been contemplating on the subject of willpower for a while and was very excited to get this book when it came out. While there is a good amount of interesting material here on the science of self-control, overall, I would say this title didn't quite live up to my expectations. As one of the

reviewers pointed out, there is a multitude of different pop sci books out there. Some are written by the researchers themselves and others by journalists who digest and interpret the information second-hand. In my experience, there is a clear distinction in style between someone who is a primary subject matter expert and someone who is just synthesizing secondary information. The researcher-authors tend to focus more on the actual experiments, strike a decent balance between pop and hard science, do a much better job explaining the meaning of the findings, and are usually pretty cautious about overly extrapolating the results. Journalist-authors tend to err much more on the side of watering down the science (perhaps because they have an incomplete understanding themselves) and generally strike a "let me explain this to an idiot" type of tone. Unfortunately, despite the fact that this book is co-authored with the primary researcher, it really falls into the "journalist-author" bucket. I get a distinct impression that John Tierny was responsible for most of the writing, where Roy Baumeister is cited as an author only because the book is mostly based on his research. I think Tierny tries way too hard to oversimplify the science and calls on very extensive celebrity examples to illustrate some of the findings. I don't have a problem with "case studies", but I really don't need to read through pages upon pages about Drew Carey's disorganized personal life and how some fellow who claims to be a personal organizer guru helped Carey get his life back on track. Additionally, I didn't need extensive biography of Eric Clapton to explain self-control in case of alcoholism and the lengthy example of Oprah to illustrate the limitations of willpower when it comes to weight loss. I and probably 99% of the educated public understand the applications and implications of the research findings without having it explained in great detail through the lives of celebrities. At best, this tactic is a space filler and at worst, an insult to the reader's intelligence. Despite these major flaws, the book does contain a lot of interesting research. Probably the most important finding is that willpower behaves similarly to a muscle, in that it can be exhausted with overuse and trained with various exercises. The authors establish a clear case for a link between high self-control and improved life outcomes and discuss in detail the research behind the success of various techniques to boost willpower as well as the types of adverse events that can result from willpower depletion. Overall, I would still recommend this book to those who are interested in the subject of self-control and its implications. As I mentioned, there is a lot of good research described, I just wish the book didn't contain as much space filler regarding the "case studies" from lives of celebrities and generally adhered to a more intellectual prose rather than reading like a "science column" in a popular newspaper.

There are few concepts in psychology with as much scientific support as the idea that willpower is a

limited resource and when its drained, people (and even dogs) have less willpower for whatever task is coming next in their lives. Perhaps the most sexy finding is that if you use a great deal of self-control or willpower in doing something you end up exhausted in whatever you do next that requires self-control even if it is completed unrelated to the first activity. For instance, you try to resist the sexual temptation of looking at beautiful women at work and without even knowing it, you end up physically weaker during your gym workout. This tends to happen when the two activities are back to back. Other people will be fascinated by the unusual ways that people can build up their reservoir of willpower. I won't give away the juice here. As a scientist, I am impressed with how the authors stay close to the science. As a reader, I relish the smooth writing style. As someone who wants to be entertained, I appreciate the great storytelling ability. For this reason, the ideas in this book are sticky. Honestly, I find it difficult to imagine an audience that would not benefit from reading this book. Educators. Policy makers. Parents. Self-help book fanatics. Therapists and coaches. People interested in why human beings do the things they do (that is, fans of psychology). If you disagree, let me know. Roy Baumeister is one of the most important psychologists alive and he is not afraid of taking risks and delving into what matters- sex, death, love, happiness, suicide, and even UFO abductions. Its about time people outside of science get a taste of his excellent contributions. I couldn't recommend this more strongly. cheers, Todd

Roy Baumeister is a psychologist who has spent decades exploring how willpower works, and what exactly it is. Here, he teams up with journalist John Tierney to write a popular book surveying his and other folks' research on the subject. The result is somewhere between a work of social science and a self-help book. Not only do we get insights on how willpower works, but also get tips on how to make it work for us. Perhaps one of the most interesting (and in the field of psychology, controversial) Baumeister and Tierney detail several studies that have subjects to some hard decision making tasks, and move on to other moderate decision making tasks. The results: those who engaged in hard decision making tasks gave up quicker on the next round of tasks (as opposed to the control group who were given easier tasks first). Another interesting finding is that glucose increases one's self-control abilities, as evidenced by studies where some groups were giving a sugary soft-drink before engaging in self-control tasks (while others weren't) and, as a consequence, were better able to exercise self-control. (The authors are quick to tell us that they aren't endorsing large sugar intakes to increase self-control, but that protein consumption can also do the trick.) Later chapters focus on the idea that willpower works best when others are holding us accountable. There is a chapter detailing several websites that help people achieve their goals by

either posting results (budgetary, weight loss, etc) on a public space, or having us assign a friend or colleague to monitor our progress (and give rewards). Another chapter focuses on Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups whose success rate MAY be attributable to the fact that members are assigned sponsors, who offer encouragement, monitor progress, and let us know that we are not alone. Still other chapters focus on how we can strengthen our willpower with exercise. The finding here is that increasing one's willpower in one area has a spillover effect such that it helps willpower in other areas. As a personal example that jibes with this, I notice (and I know I'm not alone) that when I go to the gym regularly, I also become more disciplined in my work habits and eating habits. In other words, the more you accustom yourself to using your willpower, the easier it will become to use it. All of this is somewhat controversial, because so many books and articles of late have written in a way that deny, or seem to deny, the very existence of willpower. Books on genetic hardwiring of certain tendencies often have the effect of denying that we can control ourselves (or even that there is a "we" that controls "ourselves" at all). Baumeister was a skeptic of this type when he began his research, but became gradually convinced that willpower seems like a real phenomena that we can actually use to control ourselves. This is a very interesting read both for those who are curious about what the literature on willpower says, and for those who want some good and usable recommendations on how to use willpower in daily life.

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