

Learning curve: Tricks to resist temptation

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Here's good news for dieters who face food challenges in the break room every day: A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that our resistance gets a boost after we've just been exposed to similar temptations.

"The threat of overconsumption is a real one for many of us. It is all too easy to eat or spend too much, and many others struggle with their desire to smoke or to drink alcohol or to take another pain killer," write authors Siegfried Dewitte, Sabrina Bruyneel (both K.U.Leuven), and Kelly Geyskens (Maastricht University, The Netherlands).

In the course of their research, the authors found that in situations when self-control is repeatedly tested, a defense strategy that works for a first temptation can be used to tackle the next.

"In a first study we showed that, consistent with common intuition, people performed worse at a difficult mental game than a control group if they had just attempted to control the content of their thoughts. However, those who had just engaged in a similar difficult mental game performed better than a control group," the authors write.

In a second study, the authors exposed participants to candies, which they were not supposed to eat. "Being exposed to candies without eating them indeed led to worse performance on a subsequent self-regulation task, but it also led to better regulation of candy consumption in a follow-up situation," the authors explain.

A third study exposed participants to a series of consumption choices. In each set of choices, there was one option that required more self-control than the other. For example, some participants had to choose between waiting two weeks for a discounted [video game](#) versus purchasing one at full price immediately. After the series of choices, they engaged in a final set of choices that were either different or similar to their previous ones.

"It turned out that participants became better at self-regulating their choices if they had been exposed to similar options before," the authors write. "Together these studies demonstrate that although our resistance to temptation indeed wears out when we receive a series of different temptations, as common wisdom has it, our resistance gets a boost when we have just been exposed to a similar temptation."

More information: Siegfried Dewitte, Sabrina Bruyneel, and Kelly Geyskens. "Self-regulating Enhances Self-regulation in Subsequent Consumer Decisions Involving Similar Response Conflicts." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): October 2009.

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