

To eat or not to eat? Mental budgets help control consumption

November 17 2009

If you feel like you're in a losing battle with a triple-chocolate cake, a "mental budget" can help, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"There are some behaviors that consumers try to limit but have trouble doing so," write authors Parthasarathy Krishnamurthy (University of Houston) and Sonja Prokopec (ESSEC Business School, France). "Even as one aims to curtail consumption of sugars and fat, one ends up consuming the tiramisu or the triple-chocolate cake. Such discrepancies between one's goals and actual behaviors represent instances of self-control failure."

[Overconsumption](#) is a serious issue in the United States. For example, National Institutes of Health statistics show that two-thirds of American adults are overweight, with associated direct economic [medical costs](#) of \$78.5 billion each year. About 70 million Americans are attempting to control their [food intake](#).

So, how do consumers rein in [overeating](#)? In weight-loss systems like Weight Watchers, each food is assigned a point value and members are encouraged to limit their total daily consumption to a pre-specified amount of points.

The authors conducted several studies where they encouraged some participants to set mental budgets and compared them to people who did not set budgets. They examined their consumption of sweet treats.

They discovered several patterns. First, having a mental budget alone was not sufficient. Participants also needed to have an active goal of not wanting to consume sweets. Second, the information about the products needed to match the units of the mental budgets. Third, mental budgets succeeded when consumers followed specific numerical recommendations, like the Weight Watchers® points.

"For those who wish to cut out those desserts, our research suggests some simple tips," the authors write. "First, it is important to have a mental budget. At the very least, it allows you to keep track of how you are doing with respect to your goal. Second, make sure the budget works as a limit rather than a license for the consumption behavior. To do this, it is important to have an active goal of controlling the [consumption](#)."

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: To eat or not to eat? Mental budgets help control consumption (2009, November 17) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-mental-consumption.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.