

Flexing your marathon muscles at work

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Budget cutbacks have left many of us with more work than ever. Now new research by Dr. Danit Ein-Gar of Tel Aviv University's Recanati Graduate School of Business Administration offers tips to help us stay at the top of our game. And the good news is there's no need to be a "control freak."

With her co-author Dr. Yael Steinhart of Haifa University, Dr. Ein-Gar is investigating multi-tasking control freaks. Contrary to the notion that they get the job done well, [people](#) with high-levels of [self-control](#) tend to burn out the fastest, she warns.

High in self-control people tend to use all of their resources at once — concentrating intently on the task immediately at hand — but are stymied when unexpected challenges are thrown their way. Dr. Ein-Gar quantified this surprising finding in a new series of studies presented last year at the Society for Consumer Psychology in San Diego.

"The general notion is that we all have a pool of resources available for different tasks," says Dr. Ein-Gar. "Stamina is like a muscle, but it's not an endless resource. Our new research shows how our personal, work-related resources can be measured and our on-the-job performance improved."

Conserving energy like a marathon runner

In new experiments and surveys, Dr. Ein-Gar found that people who define themselves as high in self-control are in fact the least able to

manage their own internal resources in situations which are very important to them. They burn out quickly when flooded with unexpected challenges.

"They tend to invest all their energy at once and are then left with insufficient resources for additional tasks," says Dr. Ein-Gar, who used shopping as a way to measure the effect. Analyzing results from hundreds of volunteers, she found that when high self-control people went shopping at a grocery store they were far more impulsive than those who defined themselves as low in self-control. Most surprisingly, high in self-control people made more spontaneous purchases at the checkout counter without regard to price.

According to surveys Dr. Ein-Gar conducted afterwards, such people "didn't foresee certain events like having to wait in line. It's the same in the workplace when the boss hands out a major assignment moments just before quitting time."

But maintaining energy and avoiding burn-out can be done with a little altering of one's mindset, Dr. Ein-Gar counsels. Those who think like [marathon](#) runners -- who start slow but pace themselves -- are better able to keep their energy tanks full, unlike a sprinter who gives all his effort at once.

Tips for a marathon mindset

In a second study, "Participants were told they are about to perform two tasks. Those with forewarning did better than a second group who thought they had only one task but then were given a 'surprise' second task. This warning put the first group in the marathon mindset," Dr. Ein-Gar says. "Our results can be applied across the board from managing a business to making sure we run our personal lives more smoothly."

She suggests that managers prepare employees for a particularly difficult workload by alluding to upcoming challenges in advance -- not on the day of the conference or big meeting.

"The world may be multi-tasking at a frenetic pace," Dr. Ein-Gar concludes, "but in thinking like a marathon runner, people with high self-control won't mind other people passing them. Marathon runners know that the race is long, but the winner is the one who can finish the race at the end with power left over to keep running."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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