

Could learning self-control be enjoyable?

September 20 2010

When it comes to self-control, consumers in the United States are in trouble. But a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* says there's hope; we just need a little help to see self-regulation as fun.

"Self-control failures depend on whether people see activities involving self-control (e.g., eating in moderate quantities) as an obligation to work or an opportunity to have fun," write authors Juliano Laran (University of Miami) and Chris Janiszewski (University of Florida, Gainesville).

According to the authors, approximately one in five U.S. citizens over the age of 12 admits to [binge drinking](#) at least once per month, and nearly 10 million people suffer from clinical eating disorders. These epidemics make it critical to examine what can be done to encourage people to regulate consumption.

In one study, the researchers asked participants to hold pieces of candy between their fingers, and put it in their mouths and then take it out. "The goal of this task was to let people perform tasks with the candy but not be able to actually eat the candy," the authors explain.

Once the participants completed the initial tasks they moved on to taking unrelated surveys. But the candy was left on their desks without instruction as to whether they could eat it or not. The researchers measured how much candy the participants consumed and measured how much self-control the participants usually exerted. "We found that participants who are usually high in self-control perceived the initial candy task—which involved touching, but not eating Skittles and

M&Ms—as an opportunity to have fun (they were playing with candy)," the authors write. "Participants who are usually low in self-control, however, perceived the initial candy task as an obligation to work."

Both low and high self-control individuals showed self-control success in a similar study where the word "fun" was included in the instructions for the initial task. "These results show that low self-control people can be made to act like high self-control people and show regulatory success if tasks that involve exerting self-control are framed in a way that people will perceive it as fun and not work," the authors conclude.

More information: Juliano Laran and Chris Janiszewski. "Work or Fun? How Task Construal and Completion Influence Regulatory Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2011. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr

Provided by University of Chicago

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