

# Distorting the past: Why do impulsive consumers forget their past indulgences?

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Activities like dieting, saving money, and studying require goal setting and self-control. But even the most disciplined person falls prey to temptation every once in a while. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people who distort past memories of their indulgences are more likely to indulge in the future.

"We investigated the possibility that individuals may distort memories of past behavior in order to allow for indulgence in the present. In other words, people may trick themselves into thinking something like, 'I've been good on my diet lately, so I can have this piece of cake,'" write authors Frank May (Virginia Tech) and Caglar Irmak (University of Miami).

Across four studies involving eating, spending, and studying, the authors found that people distort their memories of past indulgences when faced with an opportunity to indulge. This, in turn, leads to greater levels of [indulgence](#). In one study, the authors gave participants candy and allowed thirty minutes to pass. A bag of M&Ms was then placed in front of some participants, but not others. When asked to estimate how many calories were in the candy consumed at the beginning of the study, participants who had consumed M&Ms gave a lower calorie estimate than those who had not consumed the M&Ms. When the opportunity to indulge was not present (the M&Ms were removed), all participants gave a similar calorie estimate.

This information can help banks, health clubs, and companies looking to

maximize customer behavior and the choices people make on a day-to-day basis. For example, gym managers might send out emails reminding people how long it has been since their last workout—encouraging impulsive people to come in to exercise and ultimately increase their satisfaction with their gym membership.

People who know they are highly impulsive might want to take steps to accurately remember both past indulgences and moments of [self-control](#) (by keeping a detailed journal, for example). "Having this information available can help a person both avoid a poor decision in the face of [temptation](#) and ensure that their past self-control behavior does not appear to be more significant than it actually was," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Frank May and Caglar Irmak. "Licensing Indulgence in the Present by Distorting Memories of Past Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

Provided by University of Chicago

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