

How apps can help you make exercise commitments you can't refuse

July 29 2015, by David Glance



Temptation bundling at the gym. Credit: Flickr/Nottingham University, CC BY-NC-SA

We all struggle to make a decision to do something now that will be good for us later on. It takes self-control and is amazingly easy to subvert. Getting fit, eating less, studying more, and many similar plans, are made, and almost as quickly abandoned, as our self-control resources become depleted through the business of life and more immediate, alternative, gratifications.

Economists have long proposed that the solution to this problem is to use [commitment devices](#). Commitment devices are basically a way of locking yourself into doing something that you know you wouldn't have had the willpower to sustain otherwise. An example of a commitment device is buying a [gym membership](#) for a year, or making a bet with a friend that if you don't fulfil a particular goal, you will donate money to your least favourite cause.

Commitment devices have been shown to be extremely [effective](#) in sustaining a particular set of actions or behaviour. Commitment devices have been shown to increase the [success rate](#) of stopping smoking, losing weight and going to [the gym](#).

A variation of the commitment device is something called "temptation bundling". This is where instantly gratifying behaviour that someone "wants" to do, is only allowed in combination with a delayed reward behaviour that the person "should" do. In an [experiment](#) that evaluated the effectiveness of temptation bundling, researchers at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania split people attending a gym into two groups. The group that was exposed to temptation bundling was provided with "page turning audiobooks" that they were only allowed to

listen to whilst exercising. It seems that the excitement of listening to the "Hunger Games" proved very effective, because this group visited the gym 51% more often than the controls. The effect wore off eventually, but at the end of the experiment, 61% of the participants decided to continue to pay for access to iPods and audiobooks available only at the gym. This highlighted the effectiveness for those people at least.

(On a personal level, I use temptation bundling by allowing myself only to watch episodes of West Wing whilst on the treadmill, running. Fortunately there are 20 episodes per season and 7 seasons so this has kept me going for a while).

Where there is an opportunity, there is a technology that will facilitate it. There are now numerous websites and mobile apps that allow people to make commitment contracts that are automatically paid out in the case of not meeting a particular goal.

The most well known of these sites is [stickK](#), which was [set up](#) by economists Ian Ayres and Dean Karlan. stickK allows users to create a goal and commit money in the event of not reaching that goal. A referee is chosen to help the contract be binding and the contract can be shared with friends to make it even more so. The site currently has \$21.6 million pledged from 298,000 commitments. The commitments range from doing daily yoga to finishing and selling 10,000 copies of a book.

An [app](#) and website that is more targeted at exercise and healthy eating is called [Pact](#). This site provides an additional incentive in that if a user meets their goals, they can actually receive money that is forfeited by other users who have not met theirs. Pact has now extended this approach to companies offering [cheaper](#) health insurance deductibles to employees who meet their exercise goals.

[Beeminder](#) provides commitment contracts that are connected to a range

of third party sites like Fitbit and Duolingo. [Duolingo](#) provides language training and tries to get users to do a little training every day. Wanting to speak another language is another really good example of something that requires a great deal of willpower to persevere with the daily routine and having a commitment device certainly helps in this regard.

The biggest problem with commitment devices however, is that not that many people actually [use them](#). This may be because of a lack of awareness on the part of the general public, or more likely, the unwillingness of people like health professionals to recommend them. It may also be that these devices only work if the person making the commitment is actually aware of what they want to do and their own limitations in achieving those goals.

In the meantime however, I can recommend that the next time you want to binge-watch Game of Thrones, do it at the gym.

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