

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

As humans, we are able to control our behaviors, thoughts and emotions. This is probably one of the most important abilities of our species. It allows us to follow our long-term goals and inhibit unwanted reactions. When we come across a sweet cookie while we are on a diet, we are able to stop ourselves from eating it and focus on our long-term goal of becoming more thin and healthy. At the same time, the ability to control ourselves is one of the most fallible. Very often we give in to temptations despite the fact that our long-term goals are subjectively valuable. We watch too much TV even though we planned to spend a lot of time on important chores, or drink too much alcohol even though we decided to limit its consumption. Understanding the origin of this fallibility is important for each and everyone of us.

One of the theories that try to explain the failures of control was popularized in the book “Willpower” by Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney. The authors assume that we are unable to stop ourselves from e.g. watching too much TV after a whole day of work because we do not have enough energy to do it. Thus, they suggest that our control depends on a limited pool of physical resources. When we control ourselves for an extended period of time at some point we are physically unable to continue, because we do not have the required amount of resources. This explanation has been tested in many experimental studies, but not all of them proved it to be true. At the same time, researchers found that motivation is also extremely important. The results of experiments showed that people are able to control themselves even though they have used up a lot of the putative resources when they are motivated by various rewards e.g. money. Thus, the new theories suggest that we do not run out of a resource, but we are rather motivated or not motivated to control ourselves. Researchers suggest, that such motivation is based on the calculation of rewards and costs connected with a given activity.

One of the types of costs is always unavoidable. They appear every time we decide to perform a given task. Since we can only perform a limited number of tasks at the same time we always lose benefits connected with those that are foregone. These automatically lost benefits are described as opportunity costs. Thus, in our studies we will test the assumption that they are important for the control of our thoughts.