

commitment contracts: orientation, practicalities & use as therapeutic tools

all web links are given in the www.stressedtozest.com march '12 blog post of this handout

I wrote yesterday about *"Commitment contracts: another good way of helping us reach our goals"*. In today's post I'd like to look a bit more at the practicalities of setting up and using commitment contracts. I'll illustrate this by talking about my own personal exploration of this area, but I'd also like to highlight that I think these ideas and the associated web resources are potentially very useful tools for psychotherapists, counsellors, life coaches and their clients. In yesterday's post, I mentioned a series of websites that provide facilities for making & monitoring commitment contracts. The one I've personally explored most is www.stickK.com & I've also bought & looked through one of the stickK founders' books – Professor Ian Ayres' *"Carrots and sticks: unlock the power of incentives to get things done"*. The book is interesting, although potentially a bit frustrating. There are lots of good stories and fascinating research findings. Unfortunately it seems easy to end up with only a modest amount of hard practical advice about how specifically to make commitment contracts as useful as possible. This is partly because of Ayres's writing style and partly because often the most honest comment is something like *"In this area we very much need further research to help clarify what is typically most effective"*. *"Carrots and sticks"* is probably worth skimming through. Other recent offerings in this how-to-get-it-done field include Roy Baumeister & John Tierney's *"Willpower: rediscovering the greatest human strength"*, Heidi Grant Halvorson's *"Succeed: how we can reach our goals"*, Carol Dweck's *"Mindset: the new psychology of success"* and more dated – but still very relevant – classics like David Allen's *"Getting things done"* and Stephen Covey's *"The 7 habits of highly effective people"*.

I've also written a series of seven blog posts on the central importance of self-control. If I was a good fairy able to give just one gift to a new baby, high on my list would be "willpower" or "self-control". It's scary how crucial this is. Try clicking on Figure 2 in last year's study by Moffitt et al *"A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth and public safety"*. Do look at the blog post *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion-regulation, willpower - whatever word you use, it's sure important to have it"* and maybe go on to the rest of the series – see *"Self-control ... more on the many benefits"*, *"Self-control ... possible adverse effects"*, *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion regulation, willpower - the importance of training"*, *"Building willpower: it's like strengthening & nourishing a muscle"*, *"Building willpower: the eight pillars"* and *"Self-control ... how do you measure it?"*.

So how do commitment contracts and websites like www.stickK.com fit into all this? Well I would argue that excellent willpower or self-control – at its heart – is all about achieving wanted longer term goals without being excessively pushed off course by short term distractions. As I wrote in the post *"Self-control ... more on the many benefits"* – *"Self-control & self-discipline are at the foundation of what it takes to be an effective human being. To give just one eye-opening example, without self-control & the ability to delay gratification we would never have developed agriculture – the planting of smaller amounts of potential food (that I could eat now) so that I can harvest much larger amounts of food later. This future-orientated arithmetic was famously explored by Walter Mischel & colleagues in the "marshmallow tests" studying the ability of 4 year olds to resist eating a wanted treat now in order to get more of them later. His paper "Willpower over the life span: decomposing self-regulation" describes over 40 years of follow-up studies building on this ground-breaking 1960's work. Of his extensive published research, one of the papers I particularly like is "A hot/cool-system analysis of delay of gratification: dynamics of willpower" with its abstract stating "A 2-system framework is proposed for understanding [Cont.]*

the processes that enable – and undermine – self-control or "willpower" as exemplified in the delay of gratification paradigm. A cool, cognitive "know" system and a hot, emotional "go" system are postulated. The cool system is cognitive, emotionally neutral, contemplative, flexible, integrated, coherent, spatiotemporal, slow, episodic, and strategic. It is the seat of self-regulation and self-control. The hot system is the basis of emotionality, fears as well as passions – impulsive and reflexive ... The balance between the hot and cool systems is determined by stress, developmental level, and the individual's self-regulatory dynamics. The interactions between these systems allow explanation of findings on willpower from 3 decades of research". Or as Ian Ayres puts it in "Carrots and sticks", we all have our inner Mr Spock and our inner Homer Simpson.

Commitment contracts are a tool to help the *"cool, cognitive 'know' system guide the hot, emotional 'go' system"*, to help Spock encourage Homer to act a bit more constructively. The blog post *"Building willpower: the eight pillars"* is potentially very useful as overall orientation here. To quote *"Self-chosen goals (rather than those that are foisted on us) deepen our engagement and increase energy & persistence. Remember too that willpower is a bit like a power drill. It makes it much more likely that we'll achieve what we're aiming for. Take careful thought then about what you aim for."* As a general rule, I wouldn't recommend using commitment contracts for challenges that are either too easy or too difficult. There's little point in going through all the time and effort of setting up a contract for a challenge you're very likely to achieve anyway. Conversely there's no point in wasting time aiming for goals that are almost certainly too difficult. Think about your own previous track record of goal achievement when making decisions about what's too easy and what's too difficult. I think the place for commitment contracts is in the middle ground – to help with wanted, challenging goals that look pretty tricky to achieve but definitely possible. For example, I'm pretty good at achieving goals that are either work-orientated or that involve maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Where I'm likely to fall down is on the more "mundane" issues like keeping my accounts and my paperwork up to date. But I do genuinely want to be more on top of these mundane tasks and this is where I'm currently experimenting with some of my initial personal work trying out commitment contracts. For other people it might well be very different life areas that present the most worthwhile focus of commitment work.

A little further down the *"Eight pillars"* blog I mention a handout on skillful goal setting entitled *"Goals – ACT WISEST"*. In the handout I talk about eight components of good goal setting – *Ability, Control, Time factors, Wanted, Integrated, Specific, Stretching & Talked about*. Commitment contracts are probably particularly relevant to the last three of these eight – *Specific, Stretching & Talked about*. We need to be *Specific* when our *"cool cognitive know system"* is making a commitment contract because when things get difficult further down the line, it will almost certainly be the *"hot emotional go system"* that is being held in check by the contract. And the *"hot go system"* may well do its best to find *"wobble room"* and loopholes to escape through. So in framing my contract on, for example, keeping more up to date with my accounts, my *"cool know system"* wants to be very clear & specific what I'm committing to. It's more interesting to make the commitment fairly stretching and I also want to be clear over what kinds of outer circumstances will temporarily void the commitment for any particular week. Lawyers have called constructing this kind of clarity, making *"bright lines"*. Where there's fuzziness & ambiguity, it's all too easy for the *"hot go system"* to compromise, fudge & cheat. *"Bright lines"* keep us honest and paradoxically often end up making the situation easier to deal with. It's a bit like kids being happier and better behaved when their parents are loving but also have firm boundaries over what behaviours are acceptable & what aren't. See tomorrow's post *"Commitment contracts: a personal example"* for more practical details of this useful tool.
