

# **self-control: a few possible side-effects**

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to [www.stressedtozest.com](http://www.stressedtozest.com) on 16.06.11

## ***the many benefits and a few possible downsides to good self-control:***

Over the last couple of days I've written two blog posts on the very many benefits of good self-control – see *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion regulation, willpower – whatever word you use, it's sure important to have it"* and *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit ... more on the many benefits"*. So does an exploration of the effects of high self-control only involve a triumphal account of the many benefits? Well, mostly this does seem to be the case. Terrie Moffitt et al. were very clear that in their longterm follow-up study of New Zealand children *"The relationship with adult outcomes held across the full-range of childhood self-control scores. In other words, there doesn't appear to be a level of self-control beyond which no more benefits are gleaned"*. Roy Baumeister & colleagues at the University of Florida have however looked at the potential costs of high self-control – see their paper *"Is there a downside to good self-control?"*. The full text of this (and many other articles by this very productive research team) are freely downloadable from the university Baumeister & Tice Social Psychology Research Lab website. It's worth pointing out here that I've been using the terms self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion regulation and willpower as if they all describe the same thing. They don't. All these terms look partly at the ability to defer immediate impulses in the service of more valued, longer term goals, however they are not simply interchangeable. So, for example, Baumeister et al comment (in their *"Is there a downside"* paper) *"Conscientiousness in the Big Five (model of personality) is a blend of self-control, traditionalism, industriousness, responsibility, and orderliness. Trait self-control is thus a narrower, more specific concept"*. It may well be that aspects of conscientiousness (e.g. traditionalism & orderliness) are most helpful in moderate doses, while other aspects (e.g. self-control & industriousness) may be most helpful in high doses (DeYoung et al, 2007).

## ***self-control like a muscle that can tire (and be strengthened):***

Staying for now with the more specific quality of high self-control, potential costs can be viewed as involving three possible areas. One is short-term and is the focus of most of the Baumeister article. They suggest *"The most important cost appears to be the depletion of limited self-control resources. Acts of self-control both consume and require self-control resources, and, until these resources can be replenished, people's ability to perform many adaptive behaviors is compromised. These impairments affect not only self-control but also intelligent thought, effective decision making, and initiative"*. In other words, they argue that self-control is like a muscle. Exercise it strongly and, in the short term, you tire it and it's then not so available for what you want to do next (although in the medium term, this 'exercise' strengthens the self-control muscle). This is a significant point that I'll return to in a future post on how to develop stronger self-control. The model of self-control as being like a muscle is maybe a bit over restricted (Hagger et al, 2010), but it does describe potential costs to the use of self-control that it's worth bearing in mind.

## ***self-control as a powerful tool – that can be used for good or ill:***

The second potential area is also highlighted in their article. They comment *"We shall argue that self-regulation is a tool, and that it is a good tool, which means that by using it people can improve their chances of getting what they want. But they may use it for ends that others would condemn. Most likely a mass murderer with good self-regulation would succeed in killing more people than a sloppy, careless, undisciplined one"*. Mullins-Sweatt & colleagues make a somewhat similar point in their paper *"The search for the successful psychopath"*. They comment *"There has long been interest in identifying and studying "successful psychopaths. This study sampled psychologists with an interest in law, attorneys, and clinical psychology professors to obtain descriptions of individuals considered to be psychopaths who were also successful [Cont.]"*

*in their endeavors. The results showed a consistent description across professions and convergence with descriptions of traditional psychopathy, though the successful psychopathy profile had higher scores on conscientiousness, as measured within the five-factor model (FFM). These results are useful in documenting the existence of successful psychopathy, demonstrating the potential benefit of informant methodology, and providing an FFM description that distinguishes successful psychopaths from unsuccessful psychopaths studied more routinely within prison settings".* So this second caution over high self-control highlights that it is a very effective tool, but it is values and other personality qualities that govern whether the tool is used for good or for ill.

### ***is high self-control boring?***

The third potential cost of high self-control is captured by the title of another blog post I've written "*Who can you trust ... and do they have to be boring?*" Baumeister et al explored this in the section of their "*Is there a downside*" article entitled "*Are there other costs?*" saying: "*As reviewed earlier, individuals with high trait self-control attain better grades, have more satisfying relationships, and report fewer symptoms of psychopathology than those with low trait self-control. However, is there a cost to being able to resist temptation? Reduced emotional sensitivity may be considered a cost, though in principle one might also regard it as a benefit. In a recent study by Zabelina, Robinson, and Anicha, individuals were asked to answer the question, "What are you thinking?" on a daily basis for seven days, when they were prompted. In response to this prompt, participants with high self-control were less likely to write about either positive or negative affective states than participants with low-self control. This finding suggests that high self-control dampens affective responding (which could be seen as either a cost or a benefit!). The same study also showed that individuals high in self-control were perceived as less spontaneous and extraverted than individuals low in self-control. Other research has shown that individuals describe the most self-controlled person they know as significantly less open to experiences than the least self-controlled person that they know. Insofar as people like spontaneity, extraversion, and openness to experience high self-control may have some interpersonal costs."*

### ***the importance of flexibility:***

Interesting this. I think the crunch issue here is flexibility. Individuals who are always coolly thoughtful and self-controlled may be reliable and effective but not really a barrel of laughs. In a more recent paper – "*Creativity as flexible cognitive control*" – Zabelina & colleagues describe how creative individuals seem to be "*better able to modulate the functioning of their cognitive control system in a context-sensitive manner*". This links with a point I made in a post on therapeutic writing – "*... writing can be used with positive experiences too*" – where I highlighted the value of a "hot", emotion-linked "connection" to pleasant experience and the contrasting value of a "cooler", more cognitive "processing" of unpleasant experience. It links too to "*Self-Determination Theory* and their emphasis on the importance for wellbeing of honouring both of our (sometimes competing needs) for "*Relatedness*" and "*Competence*". See the blog post "*Meeting at relational depth: a model*" for a way to have "flexible cognitive control" and shift from "cooler" to "hotter" style when the context is right. I certainly see this need for flexibility in the cognitive control system in my own life. I'm blessed with both high self-control and high extraversion. I can spend hours studying but then really value swooping downhill on a mountain bike, communicating deeply & authentically with others, or dancing wildly with friends. "*Uptightness*" is, I think, a possible adverse effect of high self-discipline, but it can be balanced with a "gear shift" to more spontaneity, creativity and fun!

*For direct links to all mentioned research references, see the [www.stressedtozest.com](http://www.stressedtozest.com) blog post on 16.06.11. See too the associated posts on 14.06, 15.06 & 17.06 and the companion handouts on the many benefits of self-control and on how to build it.*

***[Cont.]***

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Baumeister, R. F. and J. L. Alquist (2009). *"Is there a downside to good self-control?"* Self and Identity 8: 115-130.

DeYoung, C. G., L. C. Quilty, et al. (2007). *"Between facets and domains: 10 aspects of the Big Five."* J Pers Soc Psychol 93(5): 880-896.

Hagger, M. S., C. Wood, et al. (2010). *"Ego depletion and the strength model of self-control: a meta-analysis."* Psychological bulletin 136(4): 495-525.

Moffitt, T. E., L. Arseneault, et al. (2011). *"A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety."* Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 108(7): 2693-2698. (for fuller description see <http://bps-research-digest.blogspot.com/> on 17/5/11 and also the excellent resources on the joint Moffitt/Caspi website at <http://www.moffittcaspi.com/index.html>).

Mullins-Sweatt, S. N., N. G. Glover, et al. (2010). *"The search for the successful psychopath."* Journal of Research in Personality 44(4): 554-558.

Zabelina, D. L. and M. D. Robinson (2010). *"Creativity as flexible cognitive control."* Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts 4(3): 136-143.

Zabelina, D. L., M. D. Robinson, et al. (2007). *"The psychological tradeoffs of self-control: A multi-method investigation."* Personality and Individual Differences 43(3): 463-473.

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