

Increasing Self-Control by Strengthening Your “No-Go” Functioning

Objective

To increase your self-control by strengthening your no-go functioning.

What to Know

Can you resist distractions? Inhibit your impulses? Bounce back from difficult emotions? Delay gratification and plan ahead? Self-control is all about being able to regulate yourself.

Researchers have found that people with poor self-control are at higher risk for poor health outcomes, like obesity and drug dependency. They are less resilient and are more likely to commit crimes or live in poverty. You might not be living up to your potential because of a lack of self-control. Self-control is not a fixed talent or inborn trait. It is a skill you can build.

There is a part of the brain called the basal ganglia and it has two important circuits. One is the **go-function**, which propels you into action. Whether you want to train for a marathon or pick up a sandwich to eat, you need your go-function to get started. You also have a **no-go function** that is responsible for self-control. This fires when you complete a difficult project without becoming distracted, or you resist a high-calorie dessert when you are dieting. As you get older, you often have fewer opportunities to exercise your no-go functioning because you focus on things that are important to you. You might be multi-tasking or constantly on the go and busy. You simply do what you want to do. But the less you exercise your no-go circuit, the weaker it gets.

You can strengthen your no-go functioning and increase your self-control by having 10-20 “no-go moments” each day (times when you consciously stop your impulse to do something). This increases self-control by stopping moment-by-moment impulses and desires. Here are some ways to practice.

1. Put down your phone. When you have the urge to scroll through social media but refuse to pick up your phone, you train your no-go circuit. Practice by decreasing the time you spend each day on social media.

2. Work in 90-minute blocks. Try to be productive for ninety-minute chunks of time. Stop yourself when you are tempted to get up to grab something or scroll through pictures when you get bored with whatever you are working on.

3. Delay food cravings. You exercise your no-go function when you delay snacking for even a few minutes.

4. Stick to your exercise plan. Halfway through your workout you might want to improvise or cut it short. Instead, do your best to finish the workout.

5. Meditate. You might not want to practice meditation, but if you force yourself to sit still even if you want to get up, you train your no-go circuit.

6. Out of sight, out of mind. One of the most important tools for maintaining self-control is to change the environment. For example, you might keep electronic distractions away from your work area.

7. Take a break. Studies show that people do not maintain the same levels of self-control over time. If you have two demanding tasks to complete—one immediately after the other—you will probably show less self-control during the second task. You might literally lack the energy to keep going. Giving yourself a break can help you re-charge.

8. Turn “must do” tasks into “want to” tasks. Find ways to get interested in a task or combine work with pleasure. When you approach a task as if it is an unpleasant chore, it is easier to get distracted. So, turn a chore into a game to reduce “self-control fatigue.”

9. Practice planning. Planning is an important component of self-discipline, and you are more likely to succeed when you think about obstacles you face and come up with specific steps about when, where, and how you will take action.

This worksheet will help you practice taking small, repetitive steps to increase your self-control to strengthen no-go functioning.

What to Do

Refer to the above suggestions and use the chart below for one week. Write down your daily “no-go” moments. Under the “how many” column, tally how many you do each day by placing a checkmark each time you practice. Start with just a few and eventually build to at least 10-20 small, daily actions. Write down any comments or notes. See the example below.

Date	No-Go Moments	How many?	Comments
5/15	<i>I finished my workout even though I was tired and wanted to stop early. I managed to meditate for 10 minutes without getting distracted. I worked for 4 productive, 90-minute blocks. I took 2 breaks to re-charge.</i>	✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓ 8	<i>I'm really proud of myself!</i>

Did this exercise help you strengthen your no-go functioning? Why or why not?

Did you find that this activity was difficult? Easy? Explain.

What else can you do to increase your self-control? Explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
