



Making dietary changes: Willpower or nutrition skillpower?

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"I wish I had more willpower. I just can't seem to stick to any diet and lose weight."

"If only I had more willpower, I wouldn't be tempted by the vending machine. Every afternoon at 3:00, it's like a magnet for me ..."

"I'm a junk food junkie. I need some willpower to clean up my diet."

For the athlete with a sweet tooth or excess body fat who has cravings for junk food, willpower is deemed the missing character trait that leads them into nutrition temptation. Athletes who lack willpower commonly beg me to put them on the straight and narrow and empower them with the ability to "just say no" to food sins. They're convinced lack of willpower is the root of their food struggles. I tend to disagree.

The following case studies explain why I disagree and offer another way of thinking about food management. I believe in nutrition *skillpower* more so than willpower.

Case #1: Sweets craver

"If only I had more willpower, I could get sweets out of my life" complained Rick, a 27-year-old triathlete. He trained hard, tried to eat healthfully but inevitably would succumb to his "downfalls": chocolate chip cookies, candy bars and ice cream. These sweets undermined his intentions to fuel his body healthfully. "I just have no willpower in the afternoon when my training is done for the day. I want a reward ... and chocolate rewards me well!"



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I reviewed Rick's typical food and exercise program. He ran first thing in the morning, grabbed a small breakfast on-the-run (banana and bagel), then headed for the office. He did his second workout at the gym during his lunch hour, then rushed back to the office. Come 3:00, he was "starving" and would attack the vending machine.

Rick was indeed correct in describing himself as starving; he was! He had consumed only 500 calories, yet had burned at least 2,500 calories. By afternoon, he was 2,000 calories "in the hole." No wonder he was craving sweets. His depleted body was screaming at him for quick energy.

Rick believed that lack of willpower regarding chocolate created his eating problem. Wrong. Getting too hungry was the problem. He could prevent sweet cravings by eating

more calories earlier in the day. I encouraged Rick to eat a banana and a granola bar before his morning run, refuel afterwards with 16 ounces of orange juice and a bagel with peanut butter, then have half his lunch (a turkey sandwich and a yogurt) at 11:00 (an hour before his second workout), and refuel afterwards with another sandwich and juice. By feeding his body adequately, he would prevent the urge to binge on sweets.

"I'm amazed! I no longer crave sweets. I haven't had any chocolate all week and I haven't even missed it." Rick

needed nutrition skillpower (not willpower): better fueling patterns.

Case #2: Diet failure

"If only I had more willpower, I could lose weight" complained Roberta, a 42-year-old recreational runner. For years, she'd been on and off diets, only to feel totally unsuccessful. "I've been trying to lose these same eight pounds for 25 years."

Feeling totally helpless, she came to me as a "last resort" to help her achieve her weight goals.

When reviewing her dieting history, I noticed Roberta would diet by trying to exist on fruit for breakfast, salads for lunch, yogurt for snacks and fish with vegetables for dinner. This is a Spartan intake, to say the least – as well as a very limited amount of food.

I asked her what she ate when she wasn't dieting, and she quickly listed her favorite foods: Granola for breakfast, PB&J sandwich for lunch and spaghetti for dinner. Every time she went "on her diet" to lose weight, she denied herself of these favorite foods. She even went to great extremes to keep cereal, peanut butter and bread out of her house so she wouldn't eat them. She deemed them too much of a temptation for her weak willpower.

I encouraged Roberta to stop looking at food as being fattening, and instead enjoy it as one of life's pleasures. Given that she's liked granola, breads and pasta since childhood, she's naive to think she can stop liking them. Instead of trying to keep these foods out of her house, I encouraged her to eat them more often.

I pointed out that her standard "diet foods" (fruit, salad and fish) had no power over her because she gave herself permission to eat them whenever she wanted. I encouraged her to eat granola every day for breakfast (and even lunch, dinner and snacks) to take the power away from that food – and simultaneously teach her how to manage eating granola in an appropriate portion.

If you also struggle with weight issues, you need to learn how to manage your favorite foods – not how to deny yourself of them. By enjoying appropriate portions of whatever you'd like to eat, as often as you'd like, you no longer need willpower to avoid them. Nutrition skillpower, not willpower, enhances permanent weight loss without denial and deprivation.

A skill that enhances portion management is to eat mindfully (not mindlessly), chew the food s-l-o-w-l-y, taste it and savor each mouthful. By doing so, you'll need far less food to be satisfied; you'll be content to eat a smaller portion. You'll also diffuse the urge to do "last chance eating." (You know, "Last chance to eat bagels before I go back on my diet ...") You can have more bagels (or whatever) when your body becomes hungry again. Nutrition skillpower wins again!

Case #3: Junk-food junkie

"If only I had more willpower, I would eat fewer donuts, chips, ding dongs ..." fantasized Jason, a 22-year-old graduate student and rugby player. "I know I should eat more healthfully, but I just happen to love junk food ..."

In the past, Jason had tried to go "on the straight and narrow" by limiting his intake to "good clean calories" -- a pattern that left him feeling denied, deprived.

I reminded Jason that there's no such thing as a "good" food or a "bad" food, but rather there's a good diet or a bad diet. He could healthfully balance "bad" foods into an overall good diet. I encouraged him to shift his meal patterns to front-load his calories and prevent the hunger that can all-too-easily lead to over-consuming "junk."

I helped Jason recognize that when he ate healthfully, he not only felt better but also exercised better and felt better about himself. Skillpower, not willpower, helped him improve his food choices.