



# What do we know about willpower?

By AfSFH Fellow and Head of IT, Trevor Eddolls

## A look at what we thought we knew about willpower

We all know what willpower is, don't we? It's where a person resists something tempting, like another chocolate or a cigarette or one more bet. And when we run out of willpower, we give in to whatever we think we desire. We have no control over our actions.

We might think of it as the executive function part of the intellectual brain keeping control over the emotional part of the brain.

But what is it really? Willpower is often defined as the ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals. There are other definitions, for example:

- The capacity to override an unwanted thought, feeling, or impulse.
- Conscious, effortful regulation of the self by the self.
- A limited resource capable of being depleted.

We'll look more at that last definition later.

Willpower also has a number of synonyms, for example self-control, determination, drive, resolve, self-discipline.

An example of someone using their willpower might be when they regularly go the gym or go running. It might be when they decide to stop smoking and stay a non-smoker afterwards. It might be a decision to save up for something, and sticking to that decision.

## Ego depletion model

There are even different models of willpower that have been used in psychology. One that is well known is the strength model, where willpower is likened to a muscle that gets tired if you use it too much. Experiments found that practicing self-discipline and mental focus on one thing – this might be exercising emotional restraint, resisting temptation, solving a difficult problem, avoiding distraction, or planning for the future – led to worse performance in a second test.

Looking at the experiments now, it seems that the depleting exercises weren't particularly hard. And yet, they had quite an impact on the next test. This would make it seem like people would run out of willpower quite quickly in a busy day.

**Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control. These functions are highly interrelated, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other.**  
*Harvard University*

It seemed like the prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate were involved when using willpower, and it was suggested that glucose was the thing that was used up.

Like a muscle, it was suggested that regular exercise of willpower would make the glucose last longer than the five minutes that was suggested by many of the tests, and that the person's willpower would become stronger.

This was Roy Baumeister's ego depletion theory. The importance for Hypnotherapists when working with someone trying to lose weight or stop smoking would be for those people to try to avoid carrying out any other activities that reduced their glucose levels, so that they could focus on using their willpower for the task that they set themselves. Of course, you might ask yourself, if the brain had used up all the available glucose, how did it manage any other brain functions? Or how come the glucose being used for willpower wasn't being replaced from the blood?

### **Negotiation model**

A more recent model for how willpower works is that it is a result of a negotiation between what people have to do and what they want to do. For example, you have to write an article, but you want to check Instagram on your phone. Which do you do? If the article you're writing is really interesting, then you'll do that. If you're feeling a bit tired and a bit bored with the topic, then you'll browse your Insta feed. And, later, you'll come back to the article. It's not a case that you ran out of willpower and later somehow got some more. It's just an example of this negotiation going on in the mind.

For Hypnotherapists, we would have to stress the importance of continuing to work on the small steps that our client wants to take. The client would then view that activity as being more important than sitting on the sofa watching a movie



and eating a big bag of popcorn – or whatever activity they might have wanted to do instead. That way, the 'important' action will be taking those small steps.

### **Expectation model**

A third model is all to do with how you think, or, more exactly, what you expect. Some people arrive home completely exhausted after a day sitting in front of a computer. Other people come home and go to the gym, rehearse with a band, or set to work decorating the small bedroom. It depends whether they think their resources are finite or not. If they believe they are finite, then a person will be tired at the end of the day because all their resources have already been used. If they believe that their resources are non-limited, then that person can keep going through the evening with any number of activities.

Let's suppose it's coming up to exam time. People with a limited mindset will be feeling tired, which will lead to greater procrastination, and their test scores and emotional wellbeing will suffer. This, of course, fits the ego depletion theory. However, people with a non-limited view of their resources find it easier to keep working without their scores dropping or their emotional wellbeing being impacted.

These conflicting results can be explained if we think of the brain as a body budgeting device, ie that it is responsible for how much energy we use at any one time for any particular activity. It won't let us use all the energy at one time if it thinks we might need some of that energy later. So, if you view your energy resources as limited, your brain will try to save some for later, resulting in less energy now. However, if you think that you have unlimited resources, you can utilise as

***The Stanford marshmallow experiment offered children the choice between a small and immediate reward, a marshmallow, or two small rewards if they could wait for a period of time. It was suggested that the delayed gratification required willpower. Repeats of the experiment didn't find that children who waited had any better life outcomes than those who didn't. And so, the experiment was not a good predictor of anything. But, it is still an often-quoted experiment.***



much energy as you need right now, confident that more will be available when you need it later.

This illustrates the power of belief. It's what you expect to happen. So, as therapists working with clients, we need to explain this idea to our clients and help them to change their expectations. If they expect to be able to turn down an offer of a cigarette or doughnut – depending on what they are seeing you for – they will be able to. Their reality is controlled by their expectations.

#### **No-such-thing model**

There is another theory about willpower, and that is: willpower doesn't exist. It's just a construct, a model that we use to explain an observed phenomenon. It's an idea that is as real as the 17th century idea of phlogiston.

So, if it doesn't exist, how can we explain why people can continue to do things that aren't necessarily fun at the time that they're doing them? Here are some suggestions:

- People who are better at self-control actually enjoy the activities some of us resist – like eating healthily, studying, or exercising.
- People who are good at self-control have learned better habits.
- Some people just experience fewer temptations.
- It's easier to have self-control when you're wealthy.

Or, perhaps, willpower is nothing more than a combination of motivation and opportunity. It's not willpower that makes you do something, it's because not only do you really want to do something, you also now have the chance to do it.

If that is the case, Hypnotherapists should be helping clients to focus on why they want to achieve their goal at this time – making the most of the opportunity that presents itself – and also taking steps to strengthen their clients' motivation – perhaps highlighting the strengths they already have, and reminding them when they've done something similar in the past.

Or perhaps we could use a combination of all these techniques.

***The phlogiston theory proposed the existence of a fire-like element called phlogiston that all combustible bodies contained. It was thought that phlogiston was released during combustion.***

#### *References:*

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#### **About the writer:**

Trevor was made a Fellow of the AfSFH in 2022. He is Head of IT and Social Media for the AfSFH and regularly contributes to the Journal and the website. He runs his Hypnotherapy practice in Chippenham, runs CPD sessions, and offers one-to-one Supervision sessions over Zoom.



# Talking solutions

With seven editions now online, it's time to review our new podcast

By AfSFH Head of Communications, Sally Hare

It was quite the shock, at our recent Executive awayday, to realise that our bi-monthly *Talking Solutions* podcast is now a year old – not such a new kid on the block any more! The casts are aimed at the general public and focus on informing people of the benefits of Solution Focused Hypnotherapy, raising awareness of the AfSFH, and promoting positive mental health in general. It's been quite the journey since Trevor Eddolls and I logged on to Zoom back last spring, and it's great to see their popularity steadily increasing. Our Head of IT, Trevor, is an old hand at podcasting, what with the great *Solutions* he creates with Cathy Eland. He's been the technical maestro throughout, editing out fluffs and background noises, and uploading into the public domain. With our seventh just having hit the internet it seems timely to look back at what we've done so far. Have a listen, if you haven't already; you can find them on your usual podcast platforms and on YouTube.

## Episode 1: Anxiety (4th April 2022, 27 mins)

Our inaugural cast, so we picked a topic with as broad a public appeal as possible. In it we explore how anxiety is created, share some ideas on self-care, and discuss how Solution Focused Hypnotherapy can help. There's also a short relaxation at the end – *Three Gifts*.

## Episode 2: Sleep (6th June 2022, 23 mins)

Again, a topic which affects many people, including a discussion of how sleep can suffer in times of stress. There are self-care tips and an introduction to the solution-focused approach to improving sleep. Relaxation is *Tropical Island*.

## Episode 3: Phobias (8th August 2022, 25 mins)

This episode focuses on how SFH can help tackle phobias, and explains the rewind/reframe process. Relaxation is *Float Away Stress*.

## Episode 4: Guy Shennan (7th October 2022, 34 mins)

We had always planned to have guests on the podcast, and author, trainer and therapist Guy talks about his long experience of the SF modality and tells us about his Solution Focused Collective and its manifesto, taking the solution-focused approach out of the therapy room onto a global platform.

## Episode 5: Loretta Breuning (5th December 2022, 20 mins)

Author and broadcaster Loretta joins us all the way from California to share her Inner Mammal insights – how we can better understand the role of neurotransmitters when observing the role they play in the animal world.

## Episode 6: Dr Chris Irons (13th February 2023, 24 mins)

Chris is a Compassion Focused Therapist, author and trainer. We discuss the similarities between Solution Focused and Compassion Focused Therapy, and Chris shares news of the new Self-Compassion app which he has co-developed.

## Episode 7: Susan Rodrigues and Stuart Taylor (scheduled for April 2023)

Our own Chair and CPHT course co-ordinator and senior lecturer, Susan, and CPHT senior lecturer, Stuart, discuss the benefits of SFH and reinforce how graduates of the schools and members of the AfSFH are thoroughly trained and maintain strict standards in an otherwise unregulated profession.

We hope you enjoy listening, and are planning future casts already – our June recording will combine both a guest and a specific issue, as Phil Harris joins us to talk about addiction and dependency. Of course our main aim for *Talking Solutions* is to spread awareness of SFH and the AfSFH, so do please share as widely as possible to get that momentum going! And if you have an idea for a positive mental health champion who would be a good guest, do please email me at [comms@afsfh.com](mailto:comms@afsfh.com).



### About the writer:

Sally Hare is Head of Communications at the AfSFH. She lives in Bristol and is currently building her Hypnotherapy practice there, and online.