

**Session 3: Willpower**

Last week we talked about attention, and I explained that your stress weakens your ability to pay attention. The sad reality is you cannot simply control your attention through willpower alone. It’s not just a matter of deciding to pay attention. Your default tendency is to think, all the time, and when you are stressed, your thinking is most likely to time travel.

We tend to think of willpower as just one thing but in reality, it comes in some very different forms: There is…

**I will…** do something like exercise; do meal prep on the weekend; get the laundry caught up; etc.

**I won't…** do something like watch t.v. all night; eat a late-night snack; eat dessert; yell at the kids, etc.

But there is a third type of willpower that is even more important, it’s the – **I want willpower.**

To be able to achieve an “I want” - you need the ability to remember, in the moment, what you really want! Remember what we talked about with attention? We need to be able to focus our attention on what we really want and when we are stressed, that becomes harder. In addition, what you REALLY want is in the future – the I will… or I won't… involves the present temptation and to achieve your I WANT, you have to deny your immediate temptation.

Think about it, every willpower challenge requires that you do something difficult: it requires that you walk away from a temptation or not walk away from a stressful situation! This requires the prefrontal cortex to exercise control over our emotional brain, the limbic system.

Every willpower challenge involves a conflict between the two parts of the brain: what your impulsive, emotional brain wants and what your rational, logical, wiser version, the prefrontal cortex, wants. Worse, your emotional brain, the limbic system, has habits and automatic behaviors working for it that you are often completely unaware of.

You see a bowl of candy and without meaning to, a delicious, sweet treat is melting in your mouth. Willpower depends on maintaining your attention on the longer term “want” and, without active focus, the short-term pleasure will always win-out.

Self-control is like a muscle, when it gets used, it gets tired. If you don’t rest it, you can run out of strength altogether. You don’t build your muscle in the gym, that’s where you break muscle down. You build muscle when you allow it to recover from the stress and rebuild the strength. It’s the same for willpower, you must allow recovery time. If you have had to make a lot of decisions or you are dealing with emotional events or you have just had a busy day, your willpower is being sapped away and by the end of the day, saying no to chocolate chip cookies or yes to physical exercise becomes much more challenging.

The good news is, just as with your muscles, if you stress them in the gym and then allow them to recover you gradually increase your capacity to lift heavier and heavier weights, you can do the same for your willpower. Life is constantly throwing situations at you that require you to exercise your willpower. If you regularly give your willpower a chance to recover, then over time, your willpower gets stronger and stronger. How cool is that? It’s just a matter of being deliberate in giving your willpower opportunities to recover and mindfulness is the key to that recovery. When you stop time traveling to the past or the future, or just give your brain a break from having to solve problems in the present, it resets the energy available and strengthens your willpower muscle.

That’s the role of mindfulness. It gives your mind a break from your current demands and allows you to restore your energy and your ability to stay the course to accomplish those things that mean the most. It allows you to keep your attention on your future goals so that you can walk away from your current temptations.