

# Insights from *The Willpower Instinct* by Kelly McGonigal

**“People who use their willpower seem to run out of it. In study after study:**

- **Controlling emotions didn’t just lead to emotional outbursts; it made people more willing to spend money on something they didn’t need.**
- **Resisting tempting sweets didn’t just trigger cravings for chocolate; it prompted procrastination.**

**It was as if every act of willpower was drawing from the same source of strength, leaving people weaker with each successful act of self-control.” – Kelly McGonigal**

Neuroscientists have found that self-control resides in an area of the brain called the pre-frontal cortex. Each time you use the pre-frontal cortex to make decisions, think through problems, or resist temptations, you deplete your limited willpower reserves.

In the modern age, you face an onslaught of self-control challenges. If you aren’t careful, you will quickly use up your limited self-control reserves, which leads to excessive procrastination on our biggest projects. Therefore, you need to have a large willpower reserve to avoid becoming defenseless against temptation and distraction later in the day. In addition to the two strategies detailed in my animated summary video (increasing heart rate variability by slowing your breathing to five breaths per minute and forgiving yourself for past willpower failures), here are four daily habits to strengthen your willpower:

## Eating Low-Glycemic Foods

Snack on nuts instead of food with added sugar. Cut out soda and avoid meals high on the glycemic index (i.e. pasta, bread, and desserts).

**WHY?** “Blood sugar spikes and crashes can interfere with the body’s and brain’s ability to use sugar—meaning that you could end up with high blood sugar, but low energy. When your blood sugar drops, your brain will favor short-term thinking and impulsive behavior. Most psychologists and nutritionists recommend a low-glycemic diet— that is, one that helps you keep your blood sugar steady... basically, food that looks like its natural state and doesn’t have a ton of added sugar, fat, and chemicals.” - Kelly McGonigal

## Exercising

Go outside for a light 15 minute run, or walk on the treadmill with a raised incline for 15 minutes.

**WHY?** “Exercise turns out to be the closest thing to a wonder drug that self-control scientists have discovered. For starters, the willpower benefits of exercise are immediate. Fifteen minutes on a treadmill reduces cravings, as seen when researchers try to tempt dieters with chocolate and smokers with cigarettes.” - Kelly McGonigal. Exercising increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex and replenishes your willpower reserves. A consistent exercise routine has been shown to regenerate brain cells in the prefrontal cortex and permanently increase willpower ability.

## Meditating

Take 10 minutes each morning to listen to a guided meditation (search for ‘guided meditation’ on YouTube or download a guided meditation app on your smartphone, like ‘Headspace’ or ‘Calm’).

**WHY?** “Meditation increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex, in much the same way that lifting weights increases blood flow to your muscles...One study found that just three hours of meditation practice (over the course of several days) led to improved attention and self-control.” - Kelly McGonigal. After a few days of meditation, you’ll increase self-awareness and have the ability to pause and plan prior to giving in to temptation.

## Sleeping 7-9 Hours

Turn off your computer, smartphone, and TV, and don’t start any new projects after a certain time, like 10 pm. Make it a rule. With fewer things distracting you, you’ll find it easier to get to bed.

**WHY?** “Sleep deprivation impairs how the body and brain use glucose, their main form of energy. When you’re tired, your cells have trouble absorbing glucose from the bloodstream. This leaves them underfueled, and you exhausted... even if you try to refuel with sugar or coffee, your body and brain won’t get the energy they need because they won’t be able to use it efficiently... So for better willpower, go to sleep already.” - Kelly McGonigal