

building willpower: the eight pillars

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 10.07.11

"When I get to heaven, God will not ask 'Why were you not Moses?' He will ask 'Why were you not Susya? Why did you not become what only you could become?'" Susya, a Hasidic rabbi.

In the earlier blog post and handout *"Self-control, conscientiousness, grit, emotion regulation, willpower - whatever word you use, it's sure important to have it"*, I described the extraordinary benefits achievable through increased self-control & willpower. I noted occasional downsides in *"Self-control, conscientiousness ... possible adverse effects"* and began discussing how to increase it in *"Building willpower: it's like strengthening & nourishing a muscle"*. This handout continues the how-to-build-it theme. I've listed eight tools, methods, "pillars" of willpower that are evidence-based and that I've found of great use both personally & professionally:

1.) self-determination theory (SDT): This key understanding of how people develop & flourish contains very useful clarification of what best motivates us, and what kinds of goals are most likely to lead to wellbeing. I've written about SDT several times on this website - see, for example, the post *"Self-determination theory"* & associated handouts. If you want to strengthen your willpower & commitment to reaching important goals in your life, then you would do well to make sure that your motivation is primarily "autonomous". Self-chosen goals (rather than those that are foisted on us) deepen our engagement and increase energy & persistence. Remember too that willpower is a bit like a power drill – it makes it much more likely that we'll achieve what we're aiming for. So take careful thought then about what you aim for. There's a saying, often quoted as an old Spanish proverb: *"God said take what you want, take whatever you want ... and pay for it."* Self-determination theory highlights that goals that are likely to build wellbeing most nourishingly are those that best satisfy our needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

2.) respected figures & funeral speeches: These are two methods I use very frequently to help us really focus on what our true priorities are in life and to consider the values we want to live by. They link very well to the central points made by self-determination theory (see above). So the *"Respected figures exercise"* handout helps to highlight the values/qualities that are personally most important to us. The *"Funeral speeches exercise"* (and closely related *"80th birthday party exercise"*) are ways of making autonomous goals more concrete. This is taken further in the *"5 year, 1 year & 3 months' plans exercise"*. More practical details about these approaches are provided in the relevant additional handouts.

3.) skillful goal setting: Strong willpower is a bit like a tree – self-determination theory and the *"Respected figures"* & *"Funeral speeches"* exercises help to make sure the roots are deep and well founded. The *"5 year, 1 year & 3 month plans"* take growth up into trunk. So if we're clear about the area we want to set goals for, how do we do this skilfully? The well known acronym SMART (specific, measurable, etc) is widely used when goal setting. I prefer the probably more evidence-based acronym in *"Goals – ACT WISeST"*, with its added ability to promote both improved effectiveness and greater wellbeing (& its suggestion to include others as supports).

4.) mental contrasting & implementation intentions (MCII): Here's where so much of the recent research action on improving our ability to reach goals has taken place. A 2006 meta-analysis reported on 94 relevant research studies and there have been many more since. For example, MCII (or its individual components) has helped with maintaining physical exercise, improving academic achievement, reducing excessive alcohol intake, helping with weight loss, managing anxiety, training for ADHD sufferers, tackling chronic pain, improving health professional behaviour & much more. And MCII can act synergistically with self-determination **[Cont.]**

theory. To learn more including how to use these methods, see the three handouts *"Mental contrasting: a way to boost our commitment to goals we care about"*, *"Implementation intentions background"* and *"Implementation intentions instructions"*.

5.) commitment contracts: Consider setting up a commitment contract. For more details on how to do this, see the post (and handout) *"Commitment contracts: another good way of helping us reach our goals"*. A recent New York Times article commented *"The more you precommit, the better you do, according to stickK's analysis of 125,000 contracts over the past three years. The success rate for people who don't name a referee or set financial stakes is only 29 percent, but it rises to 59 percent when there's a referee and to 71.5 percent when there's money at stake. And when a contract includes a referee and financial stakes, the success rate is nearly 80 percent."*

6.) the bus driver metaphor: This is an easy-to-remember model. It's sometimes helpful to see ourselves as bus drivers ... and buses and bus passengers! As the bus driver, our key job is to steer our lives in the direction of our values and priorities. Unfortunately we pretty much all have a bunch of rowdy passengers in the backs our buses. The passengers represent unhelpful, often self-critical or worried thoughts and feelings. Our job as the driver of the bus is to drive, not to keep being distracted by our passengers. Let them mutter and shout, gradually as they realise we're not paying much attention to them they tend to quieten down. See the sister hand-out on *"The bus driver metaphor"* for more details. I quite often also introduce a 'bus conductor'. This represents another part of ourselves – a friend & support to the bus driver. Sometimes the bus conductor can encourage the driver & help them keep perspective. The handouts *"Reappraising reappraisal"* and *"Boosting self-compassion"* are very relevant here. This collection of ideas covered by the 'bus driver metaphor' can be a fun, easy-to-remember way of helping ourselves stay on track and build our ability to achieve what's important to us despite unhelpful concerns & impulses that might push us off track.

7.) mindfulness & embodied cognition: I have written a series of three handouts on *"Embodied cognition"*. All are also available as blog posts (with direct resource links). If we want to live our lives with confidence and courage, a good place to repeatedly return to is the present moment. There's data suggesting that when we're mindful (the bus driver isn't being distracted by rowdy passengers) we're more likely to live to our values. Awareness of body state can help here too. How are we walking, sitting, standing? Are we moving through the world with energy and directness? Our posture and movement affect our biochemistry, thoughts, emotions and actions (and vice-versa). See the handout on *"Posture & feelings"* for more on this ... and the handouts on *"Muscle & willpower"* and on *"What to do"* for more ideas on this fascinating body-mind connection.

8.) incremental v's entity beliefs: This is Carol Dweck territory. Carol has emphasised the importance of a growth & learning 'mindset'. She does seem to have a valid point that can make a lot of difference to whether we believe we can change and whether we then put in the hard yards that it takes to make a real difference. Try her four step *"Change your mindset"* exercise at <http://mindsetonline.com>! As she points out *"How you interpret challenges, setbacks, & criticism is your choice. You can interpret them in a fixed mindset as signs that your fixed talents or abilities are lacking (entity beliefs). Or you can interpret them in a growth mindset as signs that you need to ramp up your strategies and effort, stretch yourself, and expand your abilities (incremental beliefs). It's up to you."* And in her many publications, both academic and general, she describes well how to put these ideas into practice.
