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*Edited by*

Irving B. Weiner  
W. Edward Craighead



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## SELF-CONTROL

Psychology has had a long and stormy relationship with the term *self-control* and related concepts of choice, willpower, self-regulation, human agency, and personal autonomy. Although the concept raises difficult questions about the nature of self, free will, and determinism, the importance of self-control cannot be ignored. Research has shown that self-control is relevant to addressing psychological and behavioral health concerns. It also plays a role in religious and spiritual traditions where concepts of self-restraint, internal self-regulation, and management of external behavior (e.g., right speech, right action) are integral.

### Views of Self-Control in Different Psychological Traditions

Each psychological tradition has been forced to grapple with and define self-control. For the classical Freudian, it was “where id was, ego shall be”; for the ego psychologist, it was for the autonomous ego to learn to regulate and

exercise greater independent control and mastery over instincts. Early radical behaviorists argued that the concept of self-control was unnecessary because all behavior could be determined by environmental causes.

More recent views place a prime importance on the capacity of the individual to develop greater cognitive and behavioral self-control and self-regulation. Self-control has been defined by various behavioral theorists as the response of an organism made to control the probability of another response, engaging in a low-probability behavior in the absence of immediate external constraints, delay of gratification, and self-efficacy.

Humanistic psychologists have stressed the importance of the individual moving away from other direction toward self-direction and autonomy. Existentialists argue that personal control is realized through exercising our freedom to make choices. Transpersonal psychology holds two seemingly paradoxical views regarding control: (1) Individual efforts are important to gain active control of our self, mind, and passions, and (2) surrendering active control is also essential, and this, too, requires a type of self-control—the control to let go, forgive, and accept. These two views also depend on the context. As Huston Smith (1983) has noted, all spiritual traditions, whether theistic or nontheistic, have developed understandings and beliefs along a continuum in terms of the relative proportion of self-control and other/Other control involved in attaining life's ultimate goals, for example, wisdom, enlightenment, and authentic living.

Transpersonal psychologists also recognize a developmental model of self-control, as illustrated by the Zen ox-herding pictures. In the early pictures, a young boy is chasing a bull, representing the need to control one's passions and thoughts. Then comes a picture of a person riding the bull, reflecting efficacy in gaining control of the self. The final picture is often blank, which can represent a caution not to become too egoically proud of the "self's" ability to exercise control, for as the Buddhists would say, no self, no bull.

### Toward Multideterministic Models of Self-Control

Some psychological models argue that there is only one major variable involved in human agency. Examples of unideterministic models include radical behaviorists (like strict cultural determinists) who posited that there was no such thing as personal self-control, radical existentialists who maintained that the individual was totally responsible for personal self-control, and biological determinists who theorized that biology at the cellular, biochemical level determines thought and behavior (control upward).

Current, larger models involve reciprocal (and omnideterministic), suggesting that control involves a mutual interaction among many variables (Bandura, 1978; Ridley, 2003). For example, the environment influences the individual, but the individual can exert personal control on the

environment (self-controlling the environment). Further, just as biology can influence consciousness, consciousness can influence biology.

These larger models have also refined thinking about the self in self-control. Self-control can be seen as potentially occurring on multiple levels. When people control themselves, what is occurring descriptively is that the self as agent is having an effect on the self as object. From this descriptive viewpoint (not implying self-duality), the self as agent or object can be referred to linguistically as the whole person (totality); one's mind, brain, cognitions, and feelings; one's body; or one's behavior. For example, I (self as agent: totality) am learning to control my anger (self as object: feelings). My mind (self as agent) is helping me learn to relax my body (self as object: body). By practicing meditation (self as agent: cognitive focusing), I am learning to be more forgiving and accepting (self as object: emotions) (Shapiro & Bates, 1990).

Thus, self-control as a multidimensional construct implies a process movement away from reflexive action to conscious choice, awareness, and personal responsibility. The belief system on which the construct is based is that individuals are not absolutely determined, can gain more autonomy and free choice, and have the ability to effect change in their lives to a certain extent in several different domains.

### Self-Control Strategies and Goals of Self-Control: Clinical and Therapeutic Models

A self-control strategy refers to a family of techniques that an individual practices in a regular, systematic manner to influence cognitive and behavioral activity in a desired direction. Self-control techniques include Western strategies such as behavioral self-control, hypnosis, biofeedback, and guided imagery, as well as Eastern strategies, such as meditation and mindfulness (e.g., Shapiro & Carlson, in press). These techniques utilize certain components, which can be analyzed and compared based on the following variables: nature of cognitive statements and instructions, type of images used, where and how attention is focused, what is self-observed, the nature of breath regulation, environmental strategies (e.g., stimulus cues), and behavioral practices.

During the past three decades, psychologists and other health care professionals have developed and refined a number of effective control strategies to help individuals learn self-regulation of emotions, attention, physiology, behavior, thoughts, speech, and actions through changing self-cognitions, reinterpreting and transforming emotions, changing perceptions, and modifying behaviors. These strategies involve one of three goals: to help the individual change the environment, to change his or her behavior, and to change his or her consciousness (e.g., cognitive control to impose meaning on or interpret and reframe events).

Critical in the development of self-control and the use of self-control strategies is the concept of choice, or decisional control; that is, "What is the goal for which the person wishes to develop and exercise self-control?" From early work looking at Eastern and Western self-control strategies (e.g., Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976), several schools of thought are now beginning to integrate the traditional assertive or change model of self-control with an acceptance or yielding model of self-control, for example, acceptance commitment therapy (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006), control therapy (Shapiro & Astin, 1998; Soucar, Astin, Shapiro, & Shapiro, 2008), dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan & Dexter, 2007), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

For example, people concerned about their body image can learn yielding self-control strategies involving meditation and cognitive instructions of self-acceptance to learn to accept and honor their bodies as they are. A person could also choose to develop an exercise program and healthier eating habits (an assertive change mode of control). Depending on the person and the circumstances, either self-control goal may be healthy and can bring about a sense of well-being. Further, the two strategies and goals do not need to be either-or and can enhance each other. Although there is no comparable concept in Western psychology (or even in English), the Chinese language suggests this possibility of harmonizing change and acceptance modes of self-control through *dongjing*: the proper and balanced combination of the two different modes of control that is right for each situation (Jou, 2001).

Further research on self-control needs to include refinement of the variation and extent of genetic and biological influences and their interaction with self-control in varying psychological and behavioral health concerns. Research also needs to consider cultural and psychosocial variables, including self-efficacy beliefs as well as existential and spiritual beliefs about the nature and appropriate role of self-control. This research may help us refine more clearly the extent to which individuals can most effectively develop positive and healthy control of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Although the construct is complex and multifaceted, it also can be a critically important aspect of human psychological and physical health and well-being and therefore deserves our continued careful attention, both professionally and personally.

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DEANE H. SHAPIRO  
University of California, Irvine, School of Medicine

SHAUNA L. SHAPIRO  
Santa Clara University

JOHN A. ASTIN  
California Pacific Medical Center

JOHANNA SHAPIRO  
University of California, Irvine, School of Medicine

**See also: Emotion Regulation; Self-Efficacy; Temperament**