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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101888>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-262614>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Becker, Daniela; Bernecker, Katharina; Guobyte, Aiste; Ganama, Daniel (2024). 'Pleasureful Self-Control'? A New Perspective on Old Problems. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 60:101888.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101888>

Review

‘Pleasureful self-control’? A new perspective on old problems

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Many societal challenges, for example regarding health and sustainability, are conceptualized as problems of too little self-control: people’s long-term goals are jeopardized (e.g., healthy weight, small carbon footprint) because one cannot resist attractive alternatives (e.g., chocolate cake, vacation in the sun). Here, we introduce a different way of conceptualizing those challenges, namely as problems of ‘too little pleasure’. We review empirical evidence showing that pleasure can support three central aspects of self-control: the initiation of long-term goal behavior, persistence in long-term goal pursuit, and resisting tempting alternatives. We close by encouraging the field to change perspectives and to include pleasure in the solution of problems that have mainly been studied as a matter of too little self-control and too much pleasure.

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Keywords

Hedonic goal pursuit, Pleasure, Self-regulation, Self-control, Health, Sustainability, Intrinsic motivation.

Most people have plans for the future. But not everyone achieves their long-term goals. Some people struggle to maintain their diet, others may not achieve satisfactory success in work or study, or fail to live more environmentally friendly. Often, such failures are ‘blamed’ on the many temptations that exist in our surrounding and

that may promise immediate, as opposed to delayed, pleasure: the cake looks delicious, social media is engaging, and our cars are way too comfortable. Those tempting alternatives can give rise to a motivational conflict, requiring individuals to exert self-control to resolve the conflict in favor of the long-term goal [1]. People’s failure to act in line with their long-term goals is therefore typically seen as a problem of *too little self-control* [2]. As a consequence, increasing control [3] or decreasing temptation strength [4] is the currently dominant approach to solving some of society’s biggest challenges associated with long-term goal failure, such as overweight, sedentary lifestyle, substance abuse, or environmental harmful behaviors [5,6]. Here, we challenge that conventional idea and instead argue that those problems might also stem from *too little pleasure*. Indeed, we suggest that increasing pleasure, as opposed to increasing self-control, may be a new and promising alternative approach. Therefore, in this paper we invite our readers to take this different perspective with us (as in [Figure 1](#)). A perspective we think can create new insights, trigger theoretical developments and ultimately shape behavioral interventions.

A problem of too little pleasure?

Our claim that problems of too little self-control might actually be problems of too little pleasure may initially seem counterintuitive. This is not surprising considering that traditional self-control research often portrays immediate pleasure as the antagonist in the journey to long-term goal pursuit – the proverbial devil on one’s shoulder that must be inhibited, down-regulated, or avoided [8,9]. Consequently, research has focused heavily on effortful or strategic mechanisms of self-control, often framing the role of pleasure as detrimental, or overlooking and under-estimating it. However, there is growing recognition that traditional methods of increasing self-control have not been as effective as anticipated [3,10]; and research exploring how in many situations pleasure can be intentional, unproblematic, and – as we will argue below – even beneficial [11–14] has been gaining more attention.

In what follows we will illustrate how pleasure can be an alternative approach to dealing with three central aspects of self-control that may cause long-term goal

Current Opinion in Psychology 2024, 60:101888

This review comes from a themed issue on Self-Control and Self-Regulation (2025)

Edited by Bob Fennis and Denise de Ridder

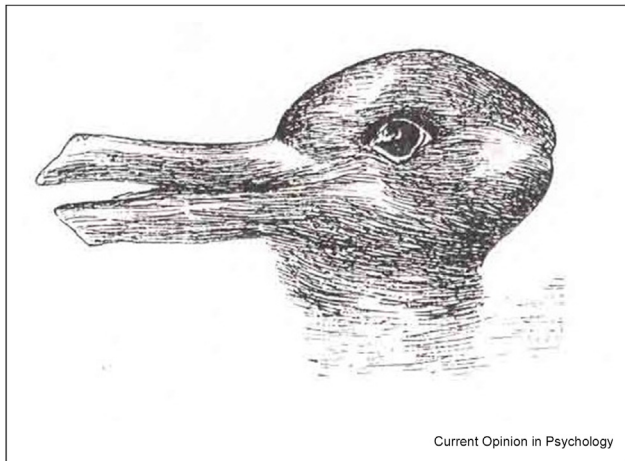
For complete overview about the section, refer [Generation COVID: Coming of Age Amid the Pandemic \(2024\)](#)

Available online 7 September 2024

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2024.101888>

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Figure 1



Changing perspectives.

Note. The 'Duck-Rabbit' illusion [7]. One can look at the same picture (problems such as overweight) from two different perspectives (problem of too little self-control vs. too little pleasure).

failure: difficulty *initiating* long-term goal directed behavior, *persisting* in long-term goal pursuit, and *resisting* tempting alternatives [15,16]. The concepts of initiation and persistence are somewhat overlapping because in the literature on goal pursuit, the term persistence refers both to people's ability to stay engaged in an ongoing goal-related activity (e.g., how long people go running on one specific occasion) and also to their ability to repeatedly engage in a goal-related activity until the goal is reached or sufficient progress is made (e.g., regularly going for a run; [17]). Therefore, we will first discuss how pleasure affects choice or preference in a single situation (initiation). Second, we will present research on how pleasure affects how long people stick to an activity in a single occasion and whether they re-engage in goal-related activities over a period of time (persistence). Last, we will discuss the role of pleasure in resisting tempting alternatives (resistance). Throughout we encourage switching to a new perspective, which includes rather than excludes pleasure in the solution of problems that have mainly been studied as a matter of too little self-control and too much pleasure.

Initiation by pleasure

A common self-control problem is the often effortful initiation of a long-term goal behavior (e.g., getting up from the sofa to go running; [15]). The usual way to approach this is to make the long-term goal or associated concrete action more accessible and thus more likely to be executed. Popular examples are goal reminders [18,19] or implementation intentions [20]. From a pleasure perspective, people should be more likely to initiate a long-term action when they expect it to be pleasurable. That is because then actions with delayed

rewards become immediately gratifying and thus more attractive to engage in. This idea has long been discussed in the literature on intrinsic motivation [21], but in the self-control literature it has been rediscovered only recently [22,23]. Several studies have since shown that people are more likely to choose healthy foods when they are presented as tasty rather than healthy [24,25]. Relatedly, people who simulate a consumption experience as rewarding (e.g., involving eating enjoyment) show a stronger preference for healthy or sustainable products [26–28]. Those reward simulations not only predict preferences, they can also be manipulated to support healthy or sustainable food choices, for example through changing product descriptions to be more hedonic by using words that refer to the sensual eating experience, such as 'tasty' or 'indulgent' [29]. Those studies suggest that increasing the (expected) pleasure of long-term goal actions motivates people to initiate those actions, and thus represents a promising behavior change tool in the domain of healthy eating, exercise, and sustainability [30].

Persistence by pleasure

Positive experiences, such as pleasure and enjoyment, should not only make it easier to initiate the long-term action, they should also make it more likely to stay engaged and repeat the action in the future. For example, a series of studies showed that people who chose a physical exercise they liked (vs. found useful) spent more time exercising in a single session [22,23]. Likewise, people consumed more healthy foods during one meal when they chose based on what they liked (vs. found healthy) and high school students studied for longer when during class they were encouraged to make their study experience more fun (vs. no instruction [23]). Another study found that strategies such as *task enrichment* (i.e., making the long-term goal activity more pleasurable, e.g., listening to music while running or while cleaning [31]) work best for persistence in activities with low compared to high cognitive load [32]. This finding is in line with studies and theorizing suggesting that the experience of pleasure takes up cognitive resources which would be needed especially in tasks with high cognitive load [33]. Accordingly, long-term goal activities that require more cognitive effort (e.g., studying) might benefit from less demanding (e.g., create a comfortable study atmosphere, consume your favorite tea or coffee) rather than more demanding task enrichment (e.g., listen to an audio book), so that interference is minimal.

Regular re-engagement in long-term goal activities is crucial for making goal progress or securing goal achievement. The traditional approach of 'practicing self-control' (e.g., inhibition training), however, shows only limited effectiveness [3,10]. A more recent self-control approach emphasizes the importance of developing 'healthy habits' or strategies that make long-term

goal pursuit less effortful (but not necessarily more pleasurable) and thereby more successful (e.g., leaving mobile phone at home during work [31,34,35]). How these strategies are developed and which work best for whom is a subject of current investigations, but it seems that a larger strategy repertoire and strategy-situation fit supports long-term goal pursuit over time [36,37].

Positive experiences during the action should also make it more likely to re-engage in the future. This idea is captured in the 'upward spiral theory of lifestyle change' [38], which argues that experiencing positive affect during a health behavior (e.g., exercising) increases the incentive salience of this behavior. Any cue related to this high value behavior (e.g., running shoes) will, therefore, be attended to and considered more readily, which makes the behavior more likely to be executed. In line with this reasoning, a series of studies showed that people exercise and eat vegetables more regularly if they enjoy it (vs. find it important [22,39]), and go to the gym more often over a 10-week period if they were encouraged to take along an audiobook [40,41]. Taken together, this work further supports the notion that increasing immediate pleasure during long-term goal pursuit supports persistence. Whether such positive experiences also contribute to the development of habitual behavior, or 'healthy habits', is subject to future research.

Another way in which pleasure can support persistence over time is through balancing long-term and pleasure-oriented, so called *hedonic goals* [42]. For example, people do not only prefer a dieting program that includes a day on which restrictions are lifted, they also feel more positive and stay more motivated throughout a 14-day intermittent (vs. straight) diet [43]. Similarly, research on strategic indulgence shows that including pleasurable activities into one's goal striving plan does not necessarily decrease performance. To the contrary, high-GPA students regularly attend university sport events, but are more sensitive than low-GPA students as to when it is a good opportunity. That is, High-GPA students make more room for those activities during low pressure times and proactively plan their study activities such that they can afford going to the sports event, and they enjoy those events more [13,44]. Likewise, people with a higher capacity to pursue and experience pleasure during hedonic goal pursuit (trait hedonic capacity [14]) engage in hedonic activities more often but this does not come at a cost of reduced job or study performance [11].

Together those studies show that including pleasurable breaks does not hurt persistence — but may actually support it. How? Taking a break from long-term goal striving might simply be necessary to regain motivation and cognitive resources, which are necessary for long-term adherence [43]. Planning breaks during long-term

goal pursuit may also make it easier to regulate negative self-related emotions (e.g., guilt), which would otherwise arise in response to a 'non-planned break' and undermine motivation for the long-term goal [43,45]. Finally, positive affect generated in the break also helps to re-engage (or initiate) effortful goal directed action through shifting people's attention and motivation [46,47].

Resistance by pleasure

The final, maybe most classic, self-control situation is the challenge of resisting attractive but conflicting alternatives to the long-term goal. Traditionally, this is approached by either enhancing control [3] or decreasing the temptation strength [4]. Our new perspective, however, suggests that *enjoying* these attractive alternatives can also help regulate their consumption. This seems counterintuitive, as enjoyable activities are expected to be more frequently enacted from a reinforcement perspective. That means that enjoying a piece of chocolate cake is commonly feared to lead to eating more chocolate cake. However, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. First, research on mindful eating has shown that people who were encouraged to mindfully consume chocolate enjoy it more and consume fewer calories later [48]. This is mirrored in the work on epicurean eating, which suggests that people's overall tendency to appreciate and enjoy eating is associated with smaller portion sizes and unrelated to body mass index [49].

Second, a meta-analysis in the eating domain reported positive relationships between eating pleasure and dietary outcomes, such as diet quality and healthy food choices, in the majority of studies [50]. A recent study extended those findings and showed that a lack of pleasure during consumption leaves people unsatisfied, craving for more, and repeating consumption within a shorter time [51]. Such 'hedonic compensation' is especially likely when people are distracted (and therefore unable to enjoy) and occurred across multiple consumption domains (e.g., food, media). This suggests that low enjoyment, not just low self-control, is involved in overconsumption by increasing the strength of the temptation. Encouraging or enhancing enjoyment of even typical 'temptations', such as chocolate or other high caloric foods, may thus help regulate their intake without the need to engage in effortful resistance or strategic forms of control. More research is needed to further explore this mechanism and its boundaries.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from our work on trait hedonic capacity. Individuals with low hedonic capacity struggle to enjoy experiences due to intrusive thoughts about long-term goals (e.g. thoughts about work spoil the pleasure of relaxing [14]). People may therefore be motivated to compensate for this lack of pleasure by, for example, using substances. Accordingly, we found that low levels of hedonic capacity were consistently related

to a higher motivation to drink in order to cope with negative feelings and thoughts, which in turn was related to more frequent drinking [52]. Additionally, an exploratory analysis showed that people with low levels of trait hedonic capacity were more likely to drink alcohol in response to stress [52]. Replicating this general pattern, we also found that people with low hedonic capacity are more motivated to drink alcohol in order to cope with distracting thoughts during sex [53]. Together, our findings suggest that a lack of pleasure can contribute to unhealthy regulatory patterns, such as the overconsumption or potentially dangerous use of alcohol. They also resonate with a new direction in prevention and intervention research, which acknowledges the importance of hedonic experiences and supports people in rediscovering or learning to experience pleasure in non-harmful ways. Examples are the Icelandic Prevention Model [54] or Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement (MORE; [55]) which both help people get access to and savor natural rather than drug-related rewarding experiences (e.g., high-quality leisure activities).

Conclusion

Many of the current behavioral problems we are aiming to solve as a field are approached as problems of too little self-control (e.g., overweight, addiction, unsustainable behaviors)—with limited success. Based on recent empirical work across various fields, we argue that it might be promising to change perspectives and approach them as problems of too little pleasure. Specifically, this work shows that pleasure can support the initiation of goal-directed behaviors, people's persistence in their long-term goal pursuit and their ability to resist tempting alternatives. Therefore, it is important to include rather than exclude pleasure, and to view it as a potential facilitator rather than detriment, when aiming to find solutions. Concretely, instead of training willpower and reminding people of their goals, we would encourage them to enrich their goal-directed actions, explore and find goal-directed actions they personally enjoy most, and maximize pleasure by avoiding distractions. Further, we would encourage institutions and governments to present goal-directed actions in a more pleasurable way and provide access to pleasurable experiences for everyone (e.g., high-quality leisure).

However, the mechanisms underlying the effects of pleasure differ for each self-control problem and are not yet well understood. Current evidence suggests that they are broadly about increasing pleasure during long-term goal activities (to foster initiation), balancing long-term and hedonic goal pursuit (to foster persistence), and pleasure induced satisfaction (to help resistance). To deepen our understanding, systematic research into these pleasure-related mechanisms is

essential. How can they be trained? How much pleasure is enough, or too much? Do they still work—or even work best—when combined? How effective are they over time? Do they work for everyone and every long-term goal equally well? And are there unwanted side effects? Such research could inform the development of pleasure-inclusive interventions, for instance in health and sustainability domains, ultimately leading to more balanced policies that support both individual well-being and societal health.

CRedit author statement

Daniela Becker: Conceptualization, Writing Original Draft **Katharina Bernecker:** Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing **Aiste Guobyte:** Writing - Review & Editing **Daniel Ganama:** Writing - Review & Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Acknowledgements

D.B. is supported by funding from the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (406. XS.01.150). K.B. is supported by funding from the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (10001C_197635).

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- * of special interest
 - ** of outstanding interest
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Further information on references of particular interest

8. In this theoretical paper, the authors argue that for evolutionary reasons, group cohesion and cooperation require resisting impulses for immediate pleasures. Specifically, they propose a puritanical morality view according to which societies moralize harmless pleasures because they indirectly undermine cooperation.
11. Across four studies using different methodology (Study 1: 301 participants surveyed about leisure during pandemic, Study 2: 224 students in 7-day ESM, Study 3 + 4: survey of adults $N_{\text{total}} = 783$) trait hedonic capacity was positively related to hedonic quality (positive affect experienced during hedonic goal pursuit) and quantity (how often people engage in hedonic activities); however, it was not negatively related to academic or job performance. Hedonic quality (not quantity) explained the link between trait hedonic capacity and wellbeing.
27. Across three experiments ($N_{\text{total}} = 457$) researchers used 'feature listing tasks' to examine how people cognitively represent sugary drinks and water, and how these representations relate to their consumption habits and current motivation to consume. The researchers report that across experiments, participants described especially sugary drinks more in terms of features reflecting consumption and reward experiences; and that those representations predicted desire and consumption in the final experiment.
28. This mixed methods study consisted of a 14-day online co-creation program ($N = 27$) that identified motivators, barriers, and solutions to healthy eating and physical activity; and an online survey ($N = 207$) with participants from the UK, Germany, and Italy to quantify these factors. Enjoyment, positive emotions and reward emerged as critical motivators of both behaviors.
51. This field experiment ($N = 220$) and experience sampling study ($N = 211$) investigated the effects of distraction on hedonic consumption and self-regulation. Both studies showed that lower consumption satisfaction predicted an increased subsequent need for further gratification and shorter duration to subsequent consumption.
52. Two studies ($N_{\text{total}} = 650$) showed that low trait hedonic capacity is related to a higher motivation to use alcohol to cope. Trait hedonic capacity was not directly related to alcohol consumption.