The Willpower Instinct Summary

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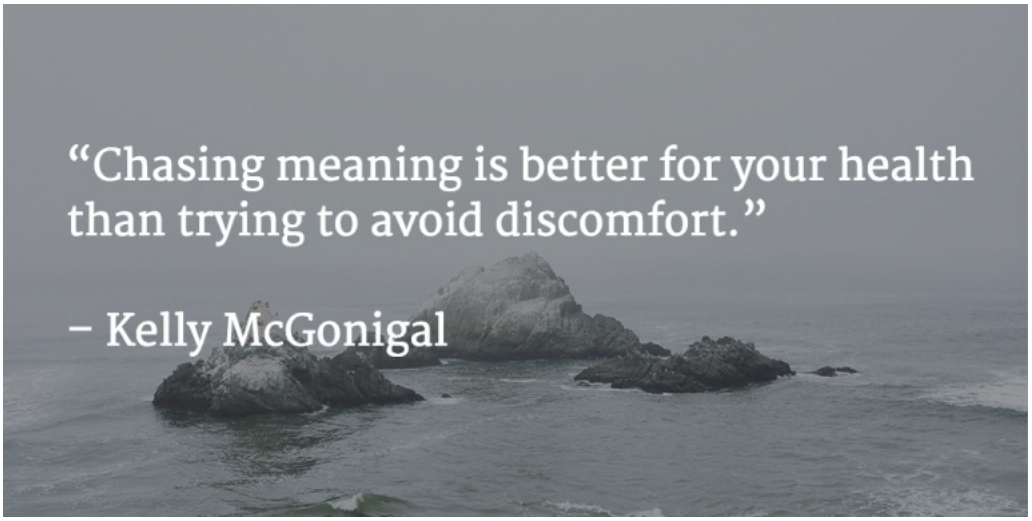
1-Sentence-Summary: *The Willpower Instinct breaks down willpower into 3 categories, and gives you science-backed systems to improve your self-control, break bad habits and choose long-term goals over instant gratification.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



This is a re-read. It's one of the first summaries I read on Blinkist, about a year ago. I already loved it back then, so it's time for a re-run.

Kelly McGonigal is a health psychologist at Stanford University, and works in "science help", the industry in which scientists try to break down their research so the average Joe can understand it.

Note: Her twin sister Jane is just as popular – she helps people gamify their lives to improve their habits.

Here are my 3 lessons from *The Willpower Instinct*, her most prominent work.

1. Willpower comes in 3 different shapes and sizes.
2. Your willpower instinct can also be called the pause-and-plan-response.
3. Don't let past good behavior be an excuse for present bad behavior.

Lesson 1: There are 3 kinds of willpower.

Most people think of willpower as **the ability to resist temptations**. However, that's only one third of the deal. McGonigal puts willpower into 3 distinct categories:

1. “I won’t” power
2. “I will” power
3. “I want” power

“I won’t” power is the willpower you already know: It’s what you use when you resist that cookie on the conference table, the urge to watch the next episode of Breaking Bad, or to swing by McDonald’s on your way home.

Question to ask yourself: Which habit is hurting my health, happiness, and career the most? This will help you determine what you need to use your “I won’t” power the most for.

Second, there’s “I will” power, the force that **helps you do what’s uncomfortable, but important** to reach your goals. This is the kind of willpower that allows you to delay gratification now, so you can reap the rewards later.

Question to ask yourself: Which habit should I do every day to reach my goals?

Lastly, there’s “I want” power, **the force that allows you to remember your long-term goals when you most need to**, i.e. in situations where you need your “I will” power.

Question to ask yourself: What is my one goal that I want to spend a lot more of my time on?

Out of these 3, “I want” power is by far the most powerful. It is not so much about the goal itself, but more about having a **strong reason and a clear why** for delaying gratification now to succeed in the long term.

Lesson 2: The pause-and-plan response is your biological willpower instinct.

Have you ever felt followed by someone and wanted to just run home as quickly as possible?

That’s your fight-or-flight response, and it’s triggered by stress, for example in dangerous situations, or in our modern world, being afraid to miss a deadline.

Instead of heightening your senses and releasing adrenaline, like in the fight-or-flight state, this response **allows you to pause and reflect, by shifting your attention to your inner conflict**. It gives you that short time buffer you need to make the better decision.

Lesson 3: Past good behavior can’t be an excuse for present bad behavior.

Let's say you're trying to quit alcohol and you do incredibly well all week. You resist the temptation to go to a bar with coworkers on Wednesday, you get through your gym workout the day after, and are highly motivated to lose those extra pounds.

So on Sunday, what do you do?

You **reward yourself with a beer**, because you've done so well.

This is the worst thing you could do.

Note: Speaking of beer, my friends Ruari and Andy are causing some riot in the UK with their One Year No Beer challenge. Some of us coach.me coaches are helping out, it's a great way to see if you want to quit the booze.

Giving yourself a reward that drives you away from your long-term goal is counter-productive and not a good strategy to win. As your reward for taking 7 steps forward, you're taking 1 step back.

The message is to **be aware of your attitude, because when you do well, you get lazy**.

That doesn't mean you can't be proud of your accomplishments, but don't use your past successes as an excuse to fail today.

The Willpower Instinct Review

I've written about willpower, created a comfort zone challenge and am a huge fan of Kelly McGonigal and her sister Jane's work. Dividing willpower into the 3 kinds has been an eye-opener and game changer for me.

Lesson 2 is a good reminder to be mindful and live life consciously, while lesson 3 helps you stay modest.

Where Spartan Up calls you to take action and leave your comfort zone, this will prepare you for it. Highly recommended summary!

Note: For more free articles and information about willpower, check out Willpowered. My friend Colin is the most thorough willpower researcher I know.

What else can you learn from the blinks?

- What happens in your brain when you meditate
- Why willpower works like a muscle and why challenging it can actually help increase it
- How lesson 3 was proven in a study
- The reason why your reward system makes it impossible to resist temptations sometimes

- Why feeling bad can get you stuck in a negative willpower loop
- What causes you to make bad long-term decisions (and why your future self won't deal with it any better)
- The study that revealed how trying to resist temptations makes them stronger
- How willpower is contagious and who you should hang out with to increase yours

Who would I recommend the Willpower Instinct summary to?

The 37 year old Mum, who's giving her best to improve her diet, but hasn't found a good reward system yet, the 50 year old employee, who wants to change careers again, but spends too much time in fight-or-flight mode to be able to think and reflect, and anyone who wants to learn more about willpower.

Learn more about the author

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