



Personal Productivity

## The Skill that Matters Most

by Tony Schwartz

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Self control is the ability to say no, in the face of temptation, and to take sustained action, despite the difficulty of a given challenge. At its heart, self-control requires the ability to delay gratification. More commonly, it's called discipline, or will. Without self-control, we can't accomplish almost anything of enduring value. And we rarely pay much attention to it.

Over the past decade, I've built a company, [The Energy Project](#), which is devoted to helping people and organizations improve sustainable performance, in large part by more systematically exercising self-control.

Over the years, we've learned that nearly everything people tend to believe about self-control is wrong. Most of us assume the only way to resist our impulses, or persevere under pressure, is to grit our teeth, furrow our brows, steel our nerves, and tough it out. Precisely the opposite is true.

Energy is the fuel for self-control. We each have one [reservoir of energy](#) to get things done. Each act that requires self-control progressively depletes this energy reservoir, whether it's when you use it to resist a piece of cake, or focus single-mindedly on a difficult problem, or stay calm when you feel provoked.

[Roy Baumeister](#) has been studying self-control for more than two decades and he has just published a terrific new book, [Willpower](#), written with John Tierney, which summarizes his conclusions. "Self-regulation failure," Baumeister argues, "is the major social pathology of our time."

Conversely, we've found in our work that skill at self-regulation creates huge competitive advantage. There are three ways to influence it — each by better managing our energy. We can

intentionally increase the energy available to us, use the energy we have more efficiently, and more regularly and intentionally renew our energy.

Eating strategically is the most fundamental way to increase the energy we have available for self-control. Eating more frequently — five to six times a day — provides us with regular doses of glucose, which is the body's primary source of energy. It serves us best to eat low-glycemic foods, such as lean proteins and complex carbohydrates, which provide a more sustaining source of energy than sugars and simple carbohydrates.

Aerobic exercise is a second way to increase energy. It which builds cardiovascular capacity and helps us to keep our core level of energy — physical — even in the face of high demand.

We can also increase our capacity for self-control by using our energy more efficiently, and spending down our reservoir less quickly.

If you use your energy at the right times, in the right ways, you spend less of it, which leaves more in your reservoir to exercise self-control. For example, it serves us best to do our most challenging work in the mornings, when our energy reserves are highest and the number of potential distractions we face are fewer.

Finally, the most undervalued way to increase self-control — and effectiveness — is to renew our energy reservoir more frequently. For example, the researcher Anders Ericsson has shown that great performers sleep as much as two hours a night more than the rest of us — at least eight hours a night on average, compared to just over six hours a night for the average American.

I nearly always get at least eight hours a night myself, but last week I attended an evening session at the US Open that ran very late, and only got five and a half hours of sleep that night. The cost was huge. It dramatically reduced my ability to focus, and left me feeling more irritable and reactive over the next two days.

Even a 20 to 30-minute nap during the midafternoon can dramatically refuel your energy reservoir, and increase both your capacity for focus and for managing your emotions during the subsequent several hours.

The irony is that the more conscious effort you expend to build new behaviors — the more you use will and discipline — the quicker you burn down your reservoir, and the more likely you are

to revert to your old behaviors.

That's why the ultimate secret to self-control is to build something we call "rituals" — meaning highly precise behaviors, done at specific times, until they become automatic so they no longer drain your reservoir and undermine your capacity for self-control.

Our clients have built powerful rituals around everything from when they do their most important work, to how they respond when they feel triggered, to when they work out, to what time they turn out the light at night.

"Civilization advances," said the mathematician [Alfred North Whitehead](#), "by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them."

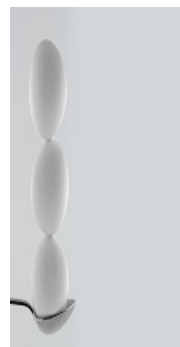


**Tony Schwartz** is the CEO of The Energy Project and the author of [\*The Way We're Working Isn't Working\*](#). Become a fan of [The Energy Project](#) on [Facebook](#).

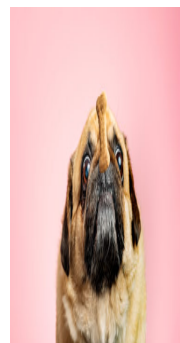


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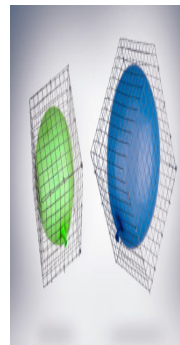


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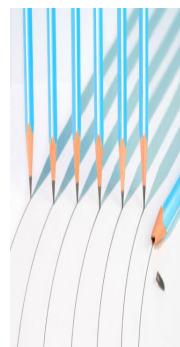
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