

**Make it a Habit To Connect Recent Brain
Research with Practical Classroom Strategies**

Do you have more self-control than a chimpanzee?

We begin with a simple study about self-control.

The study pitted 19 chimps against 40 humans in a groundbreaking experiment. What you're about to learn just may change your life...

The Research

In the study, humans were offered snack food (peanuts, M & Ms, raisins, etc.) and the chimps were offered a desirable fruit (grapes). Each "competitor" was offered two treats now OR six treats later. The chimps were willing to wait ("Good impulse control, Bonzo") for a larger treat a whopping 72% of the time. Humans were only willing to defer gratification a paltry 19% of the time! Are chimps "smarter" than humans? Well, I would argue that humans simply "outsmart themselves" much of the time (Rosati AG, et al. 2007). The humans explained that they could have "resisted" the snacks "if they really wanted to." Does this sound familiar? This leads to unhappiness over spending and weight gains, plus a lot of guilt (which often turns to depression.) So what's going on in the brain?

The brain's way of regulating motivation is through the production and release of a common neurotransmitter called dopamine. But dopamine is more the brain's way of steering and biasing you towards biologically rewarding behaviors than it is for actually having happiness. In short, dopamine is nature's way of guiding you to pleasure. A thousand years ago, happiness came from security, affiliation, status, food and sex. But today, there are countless other ways to "trick" our brain into those "time-tested" states of future pleasure (Blum, et al. 2012). We feel the pleasure in finding a bargain more than actually wearing the outfit. Pleasures include eating fatty snacks (RIGHT NOW vs. waiting), making online purchases, gambling, shopping, prescriptive (or illegal) drug usage, cheating (on taxes or your spouse), spending money (or the illusion of saving money), checking for interesting emails, and web-browsing (novelty is rewarding.)

So, what's the big problem with all of those dopamine-producing things we do? The problem is that we use a number of strategies to rationalize the event by eating more, spending more, exercising less and the result is often guilt. Then we try to get past the guilt by trying to make ourselves feel better with more snacking, more online shopping and wild promises of how much exercise we'll do tomorrow. (It's always pushed into the future, isn't it?) The strategies we use (e.g. "discounting the future, misleading ourselves, overestimating our willpower) can all help us feel good in the short term ("Woo-hoo! I saved 33% on that purchase."), but feel badly in the long haul when guilt sets in.

Millions purchase weight loss products, workout equipment, supplements and diet books. The dopamine floods the brain with the promise of a skinny body, but when the products arrive at your house, you still have to choose between the new reality of actually USING the product and something else more fun for the brain (eating, checking emails or shopping online.) The ordering of the product is what produced the dopamine. This may be unfair, but our body will continue to seek immediate pleasure (Egecioglu, E, et al. 2011), unless you have powerful strategies in place.

You might be wondering what strategies can you put in place to better regulate that "pleasure-seeking dopamine" that seems to wreak havoc on your life. You're about to find out the secrets to a healthier, happier you, especially with the holidays coming up.

Eric Jensen's BrighterBrain® Bulletin

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Practical Applications

What have we learned about our brain from the research above?

First, let's apply the lesson to the classroom, then to yourself. In the classroom, it's not the actual reward that makes kids feel motivated to do or get something. It's the *promise and prediction* of a good feeling that is a core "driver" of student behavior. That's why teachers who continually "hook" kids in *with the promise of* something fun (social, novel, exciting, status-building, challenging or otherwise beneficial) can keep kids motivated to work hard. This suggests that you practice those "buy-in" strategies. For example, "Hey kids! I just thought of something that's really weird. You want to try it out?"

But what about in your own life? How do you deal with the brain's continual "tricking" you into "fake" pleasures such as the *promise of weight loss*, *the promises of the pleasure* from a new kitchen appliance, or the *promise of an abundant, joy boosting* flower or vegetable garden?

There are a number of strategies I can suggest and each one has to do with regulating your own brain. Here they are in no particular order:

1. Set aside specific times to make the key decisions (food, money, exercise, relationships, etc.) when you're less stressed. Your will power is stronger and you'll make better decisions.
2. When you feel most tempted by the rush of dopamine for the "promise" of pleasure... stop and slow down. Focus on your breath for two minutes. Breathe in divine "support" though your nose and exhaling the day's stress through your mouth. You'll make better decisions.
3. Create "default decisions" in advance. Set your exercise workout outfit in an obvious place you can see and change into easily. Get rid of kitchen foods you should not eat so you're not tempted. Decide in advance what you'll order in a restaurant (even if everyone else orders "comfort foods") or enjoy at an upcoming holiday party.
4. Do "micro-workouts" to keep your body in equilibrium. Do a fast five-minute walk, or climb 2-3 floors up the stairs, or do five minutes on a treadmill or elliptical machine. Short workouts shift your mood (you get the dopamine) without doing destructive behaviors.
5. Keep your budget posted ("I get \$200 a month), so you can feel free to browse, but only spend cautiously online. At the malls, leave your credit card at home and only pay cash.
6. Stop (I mean this!) making yourself feel guilty for bad decisions. The research shows guilt is NOT a good motivator for better behaviors. Instead, forgive yourself and move on.
7. Every time you have a decision to make (should I exercise, eat this food, spend money, etc.) remember what you need to do and need to avoid. Then, keep focusing on your main goal. "Do I want a healthy body or not?"

Interested in more reading on this topic? I suggest: 1) [*What Makes Your Brain Happy and Why You Should Do the Opposite*](#) (David DiSalvo) and 2) [*The Willpower Instinct*](#) (Kelly McGonigal). Remember, the thought of buying these books might make you anticipate pleasure. But then, you'll have to: a) buy and read them, and b) implement what you read. .