Why do we so often fall short of our goals, yield to temptations we promised ourselves we’d resist, and procrastinate when we vowed to be more decisive?

It’s because we keep losing out in the internal struggle between the impulsive drive to indulge ourselves and the conflicting, rational desire to behave ourselves.

The human mind is not one unified self but multiple selves each competing for control. We’re our own personal blends of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, each fighting to get their own way - the one pursuing seemingly irresistible urges and the other battling to impose good behavior in the interests of our long-term personal wellbeing.

Into this eternal conflict steps health psychologist and educator Kelly McGonigal who, among other achievements, teaches one of Stanford University’s most popular courses of all time: The Science of Willpower.

Since most of us immediately recognize the inner conflict of the selves within our own persona, it’s easy to see why her 10-week course is so popular. This book is largely based on the ideas and exercises she teaches.

At stake is our personal store of willpower, a finite resource within each of us that we use to control attention, emotions and desires, which, in turn, influences our health, financial security, relationships and professional success.

The trouble, she says, is that the strategies most of us use to exert that control are not only ineffective, they also often backfire, leading to self-sabotage and loss of control.

But the good news is that there are things we can do to seize that control - and hold on to it. Here’s how:

1. Build Your Willpower Muscle

“(E)veryone struggles in some way with temptation, addiction, distraction, and procrastination,” McGonigal writes. “These are not individual weaknesses that reveal our personal inadequacies - they are universal experiences and part of the human
condition.”

The roots of these behaviors lie in our primitive past, a time when urges and instincts were key to survival. Often, there was no time or insufficient brainpower to think things through. We usually had to act quickly, driven by the urgent need for food, warmth and safety.

Yet, even then, the tribes and family groups to which early humans belonged began to have a need to fit in and cooperate, putting pressure on them to practice a degree of self-control.

Over time, brain architecture developed a system of self-control, that we know today is housed in the pre-frontal cortex. But it didn’t replace the old impulse-driven brain area. It was grafted on top of the old system. So in a sense, we have two minds. And every willpower challenge is a battle between them.

The problem is that self-control, as asserted by the pre-frontal cortex, is a bit like an energy-burning muscle. It depletes with use and seizes up if we try to use it to do too many different things.

So, for example, smokers who draw on their willpower to abstain for 24 hours are more likely to binge on something else, like ice cream; drinkers who go without their favorite cocktail have been shown to become physically weaker in endurance tests; and people on a diet are known to be less resistant to other temptations, like cheating on their partner.

However, like all muscles, you can train your willpower “muscle” by regularly exercising it.

Studies have found that committing to small, consistent acts of self-control can strengthen resolve. This could be something as simple as remembering to adopt a healthy posture, using your non-usual hand to open doors, or tracking your spending daily. It’s the simple act of doing something regularly outside the norm that flexes your self-control power.

Interestingly though, the benefit isn’t so much from performing the willpower challenge itself as from creating the habit of noticing what you are about to do and choosing to do something different.

In effect, you’re learning to pause and think before acting, a critical skill in building self-control.

“(E)xercising your willpower each day, even in silly or simple ways, will build strength for all your willpower challenges…,” the author says.

“When you’re trying to make a big change or transform an old habit, look for a small way to practice self-control that strengthens your willpower but doesn’t overwhelm it completely.”
2. Stop Good from Turning to Bad

One of the big challenges we encounter as we try to improve our self-control is a sneaky ability to undo all the good we might achieve by consciously deciding to give in to temptation.

We become the victims of our own success by rewarding good behavior with permission to do something bad.

So, for example, when we tell ourselves we’ve been good for working on an important project, we’re more likely to take it easy in the afternoon if we made progress in the morning. If we’re pleased with ourselves because we went to the gym, we may feel entitled not to work out tomorrow.

This sense of entitlement - moral licensing as it’s called - inevitably becomes our downfall.

“When you make progress towards your long-term goal,” McGonigal explains, “your brain - with its mental checklist of many goals - turns off the mental processes that were driving you to pursue your long-term goal. It will then turn its attention to the goal that has not yet been satisfied - the voice of self-indulgence.”

In fact, we don’t even have to be good to be bad; we just need to have good intentions to feel license to follow our impulses. For instance, just the act of creating a To Do list can make us feel as good as if we’d done the tasks and justify rewarding ourselves by doing nothing for the next few hours! And people who plan to exercise tomorrow may be more inclined to overeat at dinner this evening because somehow they believe they already earned it.

How can we counter this tendency?

Being aware of it is the most powerful antidote. Self-awareness is a recurring theme in this book. Most of our daily actions are done without really thinking about them.

McGonigal wants us to pause and ask ourselves: How does this planned behavior fit in with what I want to achieve? Do I want the feeling I will get if I pursue this indulgent path?

Instead of thinking in terms of balancing good with bad, right with wrong, cast aside your sense of self-virtue and concentrate on how each action you perform fits with your personal objectives.

3. Don’t Mistake Wanting for Happiness

We hear a lot these days about a neurotransmitter brain chemical called dopamine. Many people wrongly believe the pleasurable feeling we get from dopamine is an addictive reward for self-indulgent behavior. In fact, it’s a reward for the mere act of wanting to indulge ourselves.
It fuels the belief that certain behaviors will make us happy, but it’s not actually concerned with the end result - whether, ultimately, we are happier or not. It feeds the thrill of anticipation, driving us to cast aside our self-control regardless of the outcome.

With dopamine in full flow, we become the most risk-taking, impulsive and out-of-control versions of ourselves. McGonigal says: “Our brains mistake the promise of a reward for a guarantee of happiness, so we chase satisfaction from things that do not deliver.”

Furthermore, when dopamine is released by one promise of reward, we also become more susceptible to other temptations. So, for instance, viewing erotic images has been shown to make men more likely to take financial risks. And fantasizing about winning the lottery encourages people to overeat.

Offering food samples at grocery stores turns out to be more about stimulating our desire to spend more than it is about stimulating our palates.

Can we tame the dopamine rush?

Again, just knowing what’s happening can strengthen your resolve to resist temptation.

If you force your brain to reconcile what it expected from a reward with what actually happened, you’ll pretty quickly train it to adjust your expectations.

As an experiment, the author suggests you might mindfully indulge in something your brain seems to tell you will make you happy but that never seems to satisfy - for example snacking, shopping or Internet surfing. Then ask yourself if this activity really fulfilled your brain’s promise.

You might even consider turning the chemical release to your advantage. For example, buying a stack of lottery scratch cards and placing them next to procrastinated projects around the house might spark you into action. You can reward yourself with a card after completing the task.

4. Reject Self-Pity and Guilt

Sometimes you just feel like you’ve had enough of it all, right? Dopamine promises but doesn’t deliver. You’re stressed out and feeling sorry for yourself. And you think “What the heck?” as you surrender to the behavior you’ve been trying to avoid.

But it doesn’t work, does it? For instance, only 16% of people who eat to reduce stress actually feel the relief they’re seeking. The goal of trying to make yourself feel better trumps the goal of trying to practice self-control.

Yet, there are proven ways to reduce stress that are truly beneficial without giving up on your goals - like exercising, attending a religious service, listening to music, socializing with family and friends, meditating, pursuing a creative hobby or having a
massage.

It’s important to discover the activities that really make us feel better when we’re stressed and give ourselves permission to do them, so that we’re not tempted into pursuing unfulfilling rewards.

Psychologists actually call the abandonment of self-control in trying circumstances the what the hell effect, which describes a cycle of indulgence, regret and then even greater indulgence. It’s characterized by a declaration such as: “What the hell, I already blew my diet. I might as well eat the whole thing.”

Crucially, says McGonigal, it’s not the first giving-in that guarantees the bigger relapse. It’s the feelings of shame, guilt and hopelessness that follows the initial failure that pushes us over the edge. Guilt and despair sabotage our self-control.

But researchers have discovered an antidote: Instead of railing at yourself for failing, try a dose of self-compassion. This is not the same as the self-pity that might trigger loss of control. It is an empathetic response of self-support and kindness.

Instead of being hard on ourselves, we should acknowledge and forgive failure and not use it as an excuse to give in or give up.

“When it comes to increasing self-control,” the author writes, “self-compassion is a far better strategy that beating ourselves up.”

She shares the example of Ben, a teacher and aspiring writer who abandoned his novel-writing project because of his failure to meet a self-imposed deadline of writing 10-pages a day. He had felt so overwhelmed by the task, and angry for falling short and becoming distracted, he quit altogether, telling himself: “A real writer would be able to churn those pages out...(and) would never play computer games instead of writing.”

In this state of mind, he turned a critical eye to his writing and convinced himself it was garbage.

He had totally abandoned his dream when he joined her class (with the aim of learning how to motivate his students). Instead, he recognized his own predicament in the class discussion about self-criticism. Forgiving himself, he realized his failure to meet his writing goal had made him afraid he didn’t have the required talent.

To uncover a more compassionate response he imagined how he would coach one of his own students struggling to meet a goal and how he would encourage the student to keep going because any effort would take them closer to their goal.

“From this exercise,” she adds, “Ben found renewed energy for writing and returned to his work in progress. He made a commitment to write once a week, a more reasonable goal... and one he felt comfortable holding himself accountable to.”
5. Delay Gratification

Humans are suckers for instant gratification. In fact, one scientific experiment has shown that chimpanzees are actually better at delaying gratification in pursuit of a better reward than we humans.

(The experiment involved forgoing an immediate snack to win more food. 72% of the chimps were able to do this, while only 19% of college students could do so.)

This behavior is rooted in our primitive past - the urge to make sure we don’t miss out. The longer we might have to wait for a reward, the less value it seems to have. Economists call this delay discounting.

“The good news is that temptation has a narrow window of opportunity,” says McGonigal. “To really overwhelm our prefrontal cortex, the reward must be available now and - for maximum effect - you need to see it.

“As soon as there is any distance between you and the temptation, the power of balance shifts back to the brain’s system of self-control.”

So, anything we can do to create distance between us and temptation, including the sight of it, avoiding triggers that put it in mind, and allowing the passage of time, is going to help.

One particularly effective technique is to institute a mandatory 10-minute waiting time before indulging. Tell yourself, “I can do this in 10 minutes if I still want to,” and see what happens.

Or you can flip the tactic on its head if you’re actually avoiding doing something. Tell yourself you’ll do the task for 10 minutes and then you can quit.

In either scenario, you may find the willpower to do what you should be doing rather than what your impulsive self dictates.

6. Focus on Your Future Self

Focusing your mind firmly on the future is another great way to resist short-term temptation.

We often fail to think ahead when it comes to exercising self-control because most of us think of our future selves as different people, not the person we are now. We idealize them and imbue them with an ability to succeed where we cannot.

So, we put off what we really should be doing now because we’re waiting for this someone else to show up - the new us - to effortlessly make the change. But when the future arrives, our ideal future self is nowhere to be found and our same old self is all we have to make our decisions.

The brain’s habit of treating the future self as a different person to the present self
has major implications for self-control. The less we associate ourselves now with that person, the more likely we are to leave our challenges for them to deal with.

Conversely, those who maintain a strong linkage with the future him or her - which experts call future-self continuity - are much more likely to act now in their best interests.

High future-self continuity seems to propel people to be the best version of themselves now. Research shows, for example, that they save more and rack up less credit card debt, building a better financial future.

Want to meet your future self? Try mentally picturing yourself a few years from now - and think: yes, that's me. Also consider writing a message to him or her explaining what you're doing now to make their life better. You can actually do this via a website called FutureMe.org, which will email the message at the appointed future time.

“We need to remember,” says the author, “that the future self who receives the consequences of our present self’s actions is, indeed, still us, and will very much appreciate the effort.”

**7. Avoid Infection - Unless it’s the Good Sort**

Humans are social creatures. We’re hardwired to connect with others and driven by a need to belong and to be accepted. To gain that acceptance, we often mirror the behavior of those whose company we want to share.

That’s fine, up to a point. But when others suffer a lapse of willpower, we’re in danger of following suit. If our lunch partner opts for dessert, we may too. When we see others break rules, like abandoning shopping carts in a parking lot, we’re inclined to think it’s okay for us to do the same. It’s infectious.

One reason this happens is because we act on the spur of the moment, without questioning our behavior. Copying someone else just seems, well, acceptable.

McGonigal wants to get us thinking about our actions instead of blindly following others. She suggests a daily morning ritual of reviewing our goals and values and how they might be challenged during the day. Then, we might be better prepared to resist the tendency towards self-indulgence or misbehavior.

Thinking about someone we know with good self-control can also increase our willpower. So will allying ourselves to individuals and groups who share our commitments and the behavior we aspire to.

An additional source of willpower strength is a sense of pride - a belief that others are watching or that we have an opportunity to influence their behavior. Even imagining how proud you will feel when you succeed with a willpower challenge can provide the strength you need.

“Our own actions influence the actions of countless other people and each choice
we make for ourselves can serve as inspiration or temptation for others,” McGonigal declares.

8. Surf the Urge

The central tenets of the book concern: the importance of knowing yourself, examining your thoughts and being mindful of the processes that test your willpower.

You may not be able to control your thoughts, especially when they dwell on the very self-control issues you’re battling, but observing them rather than trying to suppress them is likely to produce the best outcome.

In a famous experiment, subjects were told they shouldn’t think about white bears for five minutes. But, of course, the mere imposition of this random ban meant they were barely able to take their minds off the subject.

It’s an impossible conundrum because part of your brain has to monitor for thoughts about the very thing it’s not supposed to be thinking about! Behavioral psychologists call this ironic rebound and it has a serious consequence. When we try to push a thought away and it keeps coming back, our minds read this repetition as evidence that it has validity. We confer special meaning on the thought.

Thus, trying to suppress thoughts, emotions and cravings can backfire disastrously, making us more likely to think, feel or do the very thing we most want to avoid.

The solution isn’t to suppress these thoughts. Instead of instantly trying to distract yourself from it, let yourself notice the thought.

That’s not to say you should give in to it. “Accept those cravings - just don’t act on them,” McGonigal advises.

She refers to this process as surfing the urge, but many will recognize it as a central tenet of the practice of mindfulness - being conscious of the here and now, exploring the processes in our bodies and minds.

“When the urge takes hold, pause for a moment to sense your body,” she says.
“What does the urge feel like? Is it hot or cold? Do you feel tension anywhere in your body? What’s happening with your heart rate?”

Surfing the urge can help identify any destructive impulse, observing ourselves with curiosity, not judgment. And doing so can provide us with precious time to review the actions we were about to take impulsively. It’s like a wave in the ocean, building in intensity but ultimately crashing and dissolving.

“If we truly want peace of mind and better self-control,” she concludes, “we need to accept that it is impossible to control what comes into our mind. All we can do is choose what we believe and what we act on.”
Conclusion

Kelly McGonigal has given us some powerful tools for strengthening our self-control, mostly by providing an insight into the way the mind works and how we can act to circumvent its primitive, impulsive behavior.

To hijack a well-known phrase, not only is no man an island, we are all actually groups of islands - multiple selves trying to serve different interests.

“Our human nature includes both the self that wants immediate gratification and the self with higher purpose,” she tells us. “We are born to be tempted and born to resist.”

What we know now is that in the quest for self-control, many of the things we thought might help - guilt, stress and shame - actually undermine us.

Those who demonstrate the strongest willpower have learned to work with these competing selves, not wage self-war. They watch themselves. They know themselves.

If there’s a secret for greater self-control, science points to one thing: the power of paying attention.