

Our ability to regulate ourselves in the face of an ever-changing, and often demanding, environment is a core feature of human psychology and a contributor to many important health and life outcomes. One form of self-regulation, “self-control,” has long been the subject of philosophical and scientific interest. Self-control challenges are distinguished from other self-regulation tasks in that they involve potential competing motives. For example, a student may most value studying to do well on an upcoming exam but be tempted to play her favorite video game instead. To achieve the goal that she most values, the student needs to regulate herself so that her behavior is driven by her desire to do well on the exam and not by the immediate urge or impulse to play video games.

Our broad aim is to better characterize effective self-control as it occurs in real-life contexts. Drawing from the process model of emotion regulation, we will test the idea that using indirect strategies, which allow individuals to avoid feeling the full force of the self-control challenge (e.g., changing the environment to avoid being confronted with an acute self-control challenge), will result in more positive outcomes, relative to strategies that are employed later in the time course of the self-control challenge. Using ecological momentary assessment (EMA), whenever a self-control challenge is reported, we will assess how often a variety of strategies are used and the outcome of each challenge (e.g., the extent to which the valued goal was attained). We will extend this application of the process model by considering the core tenet of the flexibility model that any one strategy is not universally the best. To do this, we will incorporate a variety of trait and situation-specific moderators. In other words, we will evaluate factors that may influence the extent to which indirect strategies result in effective self-control.