

Behavioral Self-Control

MCC Medical Patient Education
Module

Building Self Control in the Moment

Recognize impulsive thoughts. Having strategies to help you resist temptation in the moment will help you build self-control. Start by making a list of the behaviors you'd like to control and the situations that often trigger the behavior. By recognizing the moments when you get the urge to act impulsively, you'll be more equipped to create a delay between the urge and action.

Place time restrictions on impulsive thoughts. Creating space in your thinking will help you reevaluate your actions from a more rational viewpoint. This will also help you learn how to create a delay in your actions instead of just acting upon your urges.

Try belly breathing. This suggestion can come in handy if you are trying to quit smoking or curb your eating habits. If you have a cigarette or food craving, instead of immediately giving in to the craving, set your phone timer for five minutes, and focus on breathing from your belly. Remind yourself that a craving is just that, a craving, it is not a necessity. Take the five minutes of breathing to imagine the craving slowly disappearing every time you exhale. Take note of how you feel and if you still want to engage in eating impulsively or giving in to that cigarette.

Find a healthy distraction. You'll find it harder to avoid the urge if you simply sit and fixate on it. Instead, recognize the urge and actively try to distract yourself with something else. This can help distract your mind from the urge or craving and give you the space to truly decide if you want to act on that urge.

Have a go-to activity. In addition to momentary distractions, actively try to replace the behavior you want to control with a substantive alternative. By giving yourself more time to take the decision, you can make a clearer, more empowered decision.

Building Long-Term Self Control

Make a list of the habits or behaviors you want to control. If people in your life have made suggestions about your habits, take those suggestions into consideration. Remember that true change comes from the inside so also listen to your intuition and honor how you feel as well as feedback you have received from people in your life. You have to be committed to making change and building self-control in order to truly change your behaviors.

Choose the main behavior from the list you'd like to control. We all have areas of our life that could use more discipline and self-control, so remember to be easy on yourself and take things slowly. Look at your list and choose one thing you want to work on. Changing habits takes time, and building self-control takes effort. Honor your energy and set realistic goals that are achievable.

Research the behavior. Educate yourself as much as you can about how others have built self-control in similar situations. Ask friends or loved ones who have made similar changes in their lives. Do an internet search about the specific thing you are trying to change.

Take an honest inventory of yourself. Keep a personal journal, so you individualize your experience in enacting change. Developing awareness about your own emotional triggers that cause impulsivity and lack of self-control will help you recognize the behavior. Nurturing awareness around your impulsive behaviors will help you feel more in control of yourself and can also help you make decisions about how you want to build self-control. It's all about what feels right for you, and building self-control starts with awareness of why you sometimes feel impulsive.

Set realistic goals. Part of failing with regard to developing self-control is in getting frustrated with yourself for not changing overnight or being able to quit a behavior cold turkey. Set yourself up for success in your efforts by setting realistic goals and tapering away from the behavior rather than stopping all at once.

Mark your progress. Always remember, the key is progress not perfection. Keep a calendar specifically dedicated to your efforts. When there are days that you feel you lacked self-control, mark it on your calendar, and journal about what preceded it that perhaps triggered your impulsivity. The more you become aware of yourself and your patterns, the easier it will be to see challenging times coming.

Motivate yourself. Maintain clear reasons for yourself why you want to control the behavior and remind yourself of them continuously. Try to find your inner motivation and journal about it. You could also keep a list of reasons on a small piece of paper in your wallet, or program a reminder on your phone.

Channel the energy into positive behaviors. Try to fold in different behaviors to replace the behavior you are trying to build self-control around. Look at this process as a journey to find out what works for you and try not to get discouraged if a coping strategy doesn't quite resonate with and instead move on to something else. Caring for yourself will reinforce that you are actively trying to change and practice better self-control.

Develop new hobbies. Getting lost in a new-found hobby such as cars, puzzles, motorcycles, sports, or painting—among countless others—can be a wonderful distraction as you practice self-control. Part of changing behavior is replacing that behavior with something that is healthier and not vulnerable to impulsivity.

Build yourself up. Proactively encourage yourself to make the changes in your life that you want. Having a positive attitude can truly influence your ability to practice self-control. Don't be too hard on yourself if you feel like you are not reaching your goals. Keep your focus on continually making the effort, and let go of perceived failure. Just try again.

Use your support system. Let your friends and loved ones know that you are trying to change your behaviors. Ask people in your life who are supportive if you can call or text them if you need support. Part of believing in yourself and creating change also means allowing others to help you. Although empowering yourself is a large part of building self-control, letting others in your life give you pep talks, motivate you, listen when you need it, will help reinforce your decisions to create change.

Reward yourself. Make sure you are giving yourself proper kudos for attempting to build self-control and change. Rewarding yourself for practicing self-control will help reinforce positive behaviors to replace impulsive behaviors.