

# Willpower vs. Baby Steps: And the Winner Is....

By Linda Walker

People who know me or my husband, Duane, who struggled mightily with ADHD, might not guess that we spent close to 15 years one (minor!) disaster away from bankruptcy. At one point, things were so bad that Duane's wages were garnisheed for two months, there was a lean on our house and our phone was disconnected for several months for non-payment.

For the first 12 of those years we tried to "buckle down" and adhere to a very strict budget. We would deprive ourselves, never going out, cutting out all forms of entertainment, even reducing our grocery bills. We took extreme measures to correct an extreme problem. Unfortunately, we relied heavily on our willpower. Willpower was never enough and within a short period of such intense deprivation, we'd "binge spend" and get into more debt.

This has nothing to do with our lack of willpower. No matter what goal you're trying to achieve by taking extreme measures, no matter how disciplined you are, the results will be the same. Go on a strict diet that offers no reprieve and you'll quickly fall back on your old habits or worse, you'll binge and gain what weight you may have lost and more. Of course, when this happens, you'll likely blame your own lack of willpower.

The more often you fail and blame your lack of willpower, the more likely you are to believe you cannot change. Studies show that the less you believe in your possibility of success, the less likely you are to achieve your goal. So your failing belief in your ability to change becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy and perpetuates the problem.

## **Choose a More “Natural” Strategy**

Relying on our willpower is like splurging on \$5 of gas for a gas-guzzling automobile as we head out on a cross-country trip. Willpower is a finite resource that cannot be relied upon to achieve ANY ambitious goal. So don't rely on your willpower. Instead, rely on a tried-and-true approach to change, actually the same approach you used to learn to walk.

You may not remember how you learned to walk, but if you've ever seen a baby through this important aspect of growth, you know they don't just get up one day and walk. No, you took small but significant steps toward walking. At first, it may be getting up, holding onto a table and falling, then trying it again, and again. Notice that each try is not a failure but a learning experience. Each time you try to get up, you reinforce leg muscles. The stronger your legs, the longer you stay up without falling and eventually you can stay up without holding on to anything. Having “mastered” standing, you take a first step and... fall. You got up again and tried another step. Each time, the proprio-receptor nerves in your feet and ankles learned to adjust to improve your balance. And then one day, eureka! You started walking, and there's been no stopping you since.

## **The Morals of This Story**

When trying to achieve your goals, determine the next smallest possible step that will make a significant impact, and take that step. If it works, great. Move on. If it doesn't, learn from it and try again. Then move on to the next step. If your goal is to get out of debt, start with one small step that will make a significant difference. It might be brown-bagging it to lunch four days a week instead of having lunch at a restaurant each day; take the money you saved each day and put it in a piggy bank. Once each month, apply it against your smallest debt. (Pick the smallest because the reward of seeing one debt quickly paid off will encourage you to keep going for the larger ones.) Notice I didn't tell you to stop going to the restaurant altogether; depriving yourself that severely overtaxes your willpower and will mostly likely end in failure – my own personal experience with 12 years of experiments confirms this!

## **How to Apply This Approach to Your Life in Five Easy Steps**

1. Be clear on what you want to change or the results you want to achieve;
2. Determine the next small step that will make a significant difference toward progress;

3. Take action and learn from the results;
4. Adjust and re-attempt, if needed, and always celebrate;
5. Return to step 2.

Actually, Step 6 would be, “Never give up!”

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