

SECRETS FOR STAYING SANE— AND FINISHING YOUR DISSERTATION FASTER

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Many doctoral candidates struggle with self-discipline on the road to their dissertation defense. Are you one of them?

Do you beat yourself up for not sticking to your plan to sit down at your desk after dinner or on weekends? Do you skip meals, gulp coffee or energy drinks, forgo the gym, or resort to all-nighters in the hopes of making academic progress? According to the latest research, *these common practices actually set you up for failure by weakening your willpower.*



You already know when you really ought to say “no” and when you really ought to say “yes.” So what keeps you from being your Best Self at those moments? And what can you do about it?

Willpower works like a muscle, observes Roy Baumeister in his book with John Tierney, [Willpower](#). You deplete your daily reservoir of willpower energy as you use it during the day to resist temptation, monitor your behavior, or make tough decisions. Given rest, it replenishes itself. (See our past issue [here](#) for more on willpower basics.)

Ready to beef up your willpower muscle? What would an evidence-based training program for your self-regulation bicep look like? The answer is found in the acronym, “SANE,” an oddly apt acronym for how to combat the potential craziness of academic life. You can build your willpower through these four self-care measures:

- 1) S is for sleep. Most Americans don’t get the 7.5 or 8 hours of sleep needed for our best work. We are a sleep deprived nation.**
- 2) A is for attitude. Develop practices such as reframing, gratitude, and mindfulness to steer you away from the paralysis of negative thinking.**
- 3) N is for nutrition. Feed your brain and your body with life-giving nutrients. Eat more whole foods while avoiding empty calories.**
- 4) E is for exercise. Get up from the chair or couch and find activities that you will stick with. Walk. Dance. Bike. Move!**

How would you score yourself on the above four dimensions? Shorting yourself on any of them can lead you astray despite your best intentions, so let’s examine them more fully.

S IS FOR SLEEP

Being mildly but chronically sleep deprived makes you more susceptible to stress, cravings, and temptation.

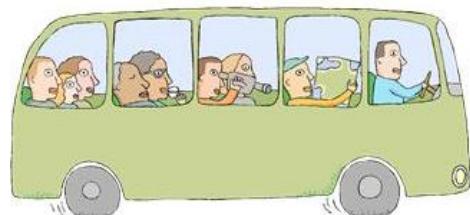
Noted Gallup strengths expert Tom Rath puts it bluntly: "Sleep less, achieve less." In his forthcoming book, [Eat, Move, Sleep: How Small Choices Make A Big Difference](#), he cites research that shows that driving while sleepless can be as dangerous as drunk driving. What are the implications for the quality of your work if you dissertation while sleepless?

A totally dark, cool room will make it easier for your body to fall asleep, according to the research Rath cites. Hitting the snooze button is counterproductive, he adds, as any further sleep is of poor quality at best. In [The Willpower Instinct](#), Stanford health educator Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., offers additional advice: If you are staying up late, consider what you are saying "yes" to instead of sleep, and then see if you can cut back on whatever is keeping you up. (Ed. Note: For a real challenge, try going to bed early enough that you do not need an alarm to wake you.)

A IS FOR ATTITUDE

Negative moods, including brooding, worrying, and general stressing out, will also drain your willpower account.

Learning to calm yourself, to become more positive, to focus, and so on, will add to your self-control. Meditation can provide you with that, but surprisingly, you can get some those benefits without sitting for an hour a day. One of the simplest things you can do is to just slow down your breathing to four to six breaths per minute and calmly observe your thoughts and feelings.



The bumper sticker on the car next to mine in the supermarket parking lot surprised me: "Don't believe everything you think."

This turns out to be good advice, as practitioners of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) have found. When negative thoughts plague you, simply notice them--without trying to suppress or challenge them. Write them down. Read them aloud and notice how they start to lose their grip.

Another strategy is to imagine that you are driving a bus. Different passengers may come to the front to pick on you ["Your advisor will never accept this," "You'll never get this done," "You don't have what it takes," etc.], and while you can't really tune them out, *you don't have to give*

them the wheel. Tell them to go sit down while you take the road that has meaning for you. That just might make them yell louder, but just keep going!

N IS FOR NUTRITION

Just as you need self-control to resist unhealthy foods, you also need to eat well to have self-control.

Our brains need a steady level of glucose to function well. Unfortunately, as Rath notes, most of us overdo the carbs, especially when we think we need a boost. We grab a sugary drink, chips, cookies, and other empty calories that cause a temporary spike in our blood sugar—and then a drastic drop that causes us to literally droop. Artificial boosts undercut the development of sustainable habits for zest and focus.

“Research suggests protein stimulates the cells that keep us thin and alert,” he writes, sharing the view of many experts of the importance of eating more plants-based foods while limiting the intake of red and processed meats. He offers an easy tip: Go for colorful foods as the refined, carb-laden junk is often white. If you miss a meal, he adds, reject those shockingly calorie-laden granola bars in your desk or purse in favor of packets of mixed nuts.

Running on caffeine or sugar or on empty is just not sustainable for long-term success or health. Sitting down to eat slowly with others can improve your waistline, your longevity, and your social relationships.

E IS FOR EXERCISE

Nothing beats exercise for benefits for mental and physical health.

It’s the “miracle drug,” quips health educator McGonigal. She shares research showing that exercising three times a week leads to better nutrition, less TV time, fewer impulsive purchases, increased punctuality, less procrastination, better focus, and more emotional control.

The more you move your body, the more benefits you gain, including a bigger and faster brain.

Exercise relieves cravings and stress while growing brain areas associated with planning and control. Several studies concur that the biggest mood-boosting, stress-busting effects come from five-minute doses of exercise, she observes. That’s right—*five* minutes. So take a walk, play with the dog, garden, dance for just five or ten minutes. Then get back to dissertationing. (You’ll also benefit from shorter stretches of sitting.)

Are you ready to become more “SANE?” Pick one or two of the above areas to start making changes in the desired direction, then watch the benefits accrue. Let me know how it goes. Seek support from your family, friends, coworkers or cohort, and keep in mind that coaches, of course, are extraordinarily helpful with habit change and willpower enhancement.

Remember that your overall success and well-being hinge on making the right choices on a daily basis. May you finish your doctorate and prosper!

Recommended Readubg

ACT Made Simple by Russ Harris

Eat, Move, Sleep by Tom Rath (in press, release date to be announced)

The Willpower Instinct by Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

Willpower by Roy Baumeister, Ph.D. & John Tierney

Willpower: Self-control, decision fatigue, and energy. Video of Roy Baumeister’s keynote address to Royal Society of the Arts.

Originally published in the free, award-winning eletter, www.abdsurvivalguide.com.