Self-regulation and Close Relationships
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Self-regulation refers to the ways in which the mind exerts controls over its drives, functions, and states. Self-regulation is thus essential in keeping innate, base tendencies at bay in favor of more civilized behavior (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Self-regulation can be thought of as the self acting on itself for some higher or desired purpose, such as inhibiting the urge to make a cutting remark for the sake of harmoniousness, getting off the couch to go for a jog in the interest of health, or refraining from eating meat for the sake of one’s ethical or religious beliefs.

Close relationships are benefited greatly by self-regulation. A mother who cannot control her temper—a husband who gambles away his paycheck—will undoubtedly discover that poor self-regulation damages relationships. However, we propose that the connection between self-regulation and close relationships is reciprocal: healthy close relationships not only follow good self-regulation, they actually strengthen self-regulation. In short, our assertion is that being in a healthy relationship aids in self-regulation, and the capacity to self-regulate benefits close relationships.

The term “self-regulation” is essentially interchangeable with the term “self-control”. However, there is a subtle connotative difference between the two which merits mentioning. “Self-regulation” hints of bringing the self in line with a preferred state on a regular basis through either conscious or nonconscious processes, whereas “self-control” tends to be associated with conscious impulse control (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Most authors do not draw this distinction and view the terms as synonymous. This chapter will focus primarily on conscious self-regulation, and the two terms will be used interchangeably.

There is a general belief among psychologists and laypersons that self-control is beneficial to performance in a variety of domains—such as academics or sports. This appears to be a safe assumption. In fact, inquiries into the degree to which self-control is beneficial have yielded some startling findings. A recent study investigating the contributions of both IQ and self-control on academic performance found that self-control was a much better predictor of academic performance than was IQ (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006). Thus, a domain typically viewed as highly dependent upon intelligence is actually more dependent on self-regulation. The impact of self-control on close relationships may prove to be similarly surprising, both in the strength of the relationship and also the bidirectional nature of the relationship.

While we will not make a distinction between self-control, self-regulation, or self-discipline, one distinction that must be made is between trait self-control and state self-control. Trait self-control is what is most frequently understood when people refer to a person’s capacity for self-control or self-regulation. Trait self-control is the extent to which individuals are able to control their baser impulses over time and in different situations. Thus, when someone is considered to have the trait of good self-control, the assumption is that the person overrides impulses consistently and in a variety of contexts.
Indeed, there is empirical evidence that an individual’s trait self-control is a stable quality over time (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Whereas trait self-control is relatively consistent, state self-control is by definition transitory. It varies over time and across situations in a way that trait self-control does not. State self-control may fluctuate insofar as the ability to override all of one’s less desirable drives is dependent upon a common, limited self-regulatory resource. Thus, when self-regulatory resources are low, one is “ego-depleted” and self-control failure is more likely (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice, 1998; Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Muraven, Tice & Baumeister; 1998; Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004). Ego depletion occurs when a consistent or a focused demand is made upon the self-regulatory resources, temporarily using up the resources. During this time of reduced resources, the individual is less able to self-regulate. Time without self-control demands is required to replenish self-regulatory reserves. Experimentally, self-regulatory depletion has been demonstrated in over 40 published experiments resulting from a broad variety of self-regulatory tasks ranging from the refraining of eating tempting foods to prolonged orthographical tasks, to controlling one’s mood (Baumeister, Schmeichel & Vohs, in press). This variety of experimental manipulations which result in reduced self-regulatory control offers essential support to the proposition that exerting control over one’s self saps a common self-regulatory resource. An example of ego depletion, or state self-control, is as follows. If a newly married woman spends a long evening with her in-laws during which she is constantly biting her tongue, she is consequently in a temporary state of weakened self-regulation capacity, and she is more likely to snap at her partner, kick her dog, break her diet, or indulge other relationship-harming impulses even if these are things she would not do with self-regulatory resources intact. Clearly, state self-control must be taken into account when discussing the harmonious functioning of a relationship.

State and trait self-control may be better understood in relation to broader theories of self-regulation. One such broad theory into which the present discussion of self-control fits is the Test-Operate-Test-Exit (TOTE) System (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Powers, 1973). The initial test phase consists of the self determining one’s standing relative to a goal or desired state. For instance, if someone’s goal is a happy marriage, a test phase might consist of comparing one’s feelings toward a partner relative to the goal of a harmonious relationship. If there is no difference between a desired goal and an individual’s current state, then the process does not advance to “operate”. However, the “operate” phase begins if there is a discrepancy between one’s goals (i.e., a happy marriage) and one’s state (i.e., hostile feeling towards one’s mate). The “operate” phase involves the self acting to achieve a goal. Thus, in the marriage example, an individual who detects a difference between their current feelings toward their mate and their marital goals will act so as to bring themselves in line with the goal, for instance by trying to better one’s feelings about one’s partner. The next “test” phase determines whether the action was efficacious in bringing about the desired goal or state. If a gap persists between the goal and the individual’s current state, then the self returns to the “operate” phase. When a discrepancy no longer exists, then the individual “exits” the feedback loop. This has been described as a discrepancy-reducing loop, because the aim is to eliminate discrepancies between goal and state (Carver, 2004).
The “operate” phase is unique in TOTE feedback loop in that it constitutes a deliberate effort or action. It is essentially the self acting on the self, or self-regulation. The capacity to “operate” is therefore dependent upon self-regulatory resources (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004). Those with compromised state self-control may be unable to effectively “operate”, while those with their complete self-control resources will have a greater capacity to act. Similarly, those with good trait self-control will more consistently act on the self in an effective manner than those with poor trait self-control, thereby achieving goals such as healthy relationships.

Natural Selection and the Origin of Self-control

Everyone experiences self-control failures in the course of life. One line of inquiry is the reasons people fail to effectively control themselves (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton & Tice, 1994). An equally intriguing question is why people are able to exercise self-control at all as opposed to simply acting on impulse. The answer may lie in evolution. Evolutionary psychology has thus far been centered on the less noble side of human relationships, focusing on male sexual opportunism and the female pursuit of resources through mate selection. However, this is only part of the story of nature’s influence on close relationships. Humans have a consistent and profound longing for close interpersonal connectedness. This desire has been called the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This longing for closeness may be due to the fact that human survival has largely come to depend on living and associating with other people. Human ancestors who were part of a tribe or social group were more likely to survive than those who were on their own. In short, being allowed to be part of a group has become essential for survival. Given the high value of social acceptance and the deadly consequences of social rejection, a faculty that increased the likelihood of group membership is something that would have increased survival. Heatherton and Vohs (1998) have argued that self-control evolved in humans because the ability to manage one’s actions and responses is crucial to accessing the life-sustaining benefits of group membership. They contend that human ancestors who were best able to restrain responses and modify behaviors were more likely to maintain social and dyadic relationships. Individuals in human evolutionary past who were unable to control themselves were not granted the benefits of group membership, such as hunting as a group, and died off. Similarly, socially excluded individuals would have had a more difficult time finding a mate and passing on their genes. Again, the argument for an evolutionary origin to self-regulation is that group membership is essential for survival and reproduction, and self-regulation is required for group membership. For instance, those in the evolutionary past who tried to initiate sex with the mate of an alpha male, or who were unable to accept an equitable sharing of food, would have found themselves exiled from the group, while those who were able to exercise restraint would have been allowed to retain the benefits of group membership. On the Heatherton and Vohs view (1998), self-control is more than just good for relationships; the origin of self-control is inextricably linked to the value of relationships with others. Close relationships as the basis for the evolution of self-control has logical appeal, but empirical evidence of the kind describing gender-based differential reproductive strategies is presently lacking. A direct examination of parent trait self-control relative to
child trait self-control would make an important contribution to the understanding of the genetic basis for self-control. However, our search yielded no such study. In the absence of clear evidence, one would expect data showing both that self-control is heritable and that self-control failures continue to be punished by social exclusion today. Indeed, there is some empirical support to this effect. In laboratory examinations of mice, genetics have been shown to affect whether the mice would impulsively take a small reward or whether they could refrain from taking it and thereby earn a larger reward, suggesting that self-control has a genetic component that can be passed on (Brunner & Hen, 1997; Otobe & Makino, 2004). This is not strong evidence of evolution, given that heritability is better suited for describing individual differences than evolved characteristics, but it does seem to indicate that there is a genetic aspect to self-control that could be passed on. Of course, a genetic contribution to self-control does not preclude social factors from influencing self-control. The impact of close relationships, which is one important environmental influence on self-control, will be examined shortly.

It appears that the social exile of those who have shown self-control failure is not only in our evolutionary past. Today, people who show certain self-regulatory failures such as theft or assault are incarcerated. They are not allowed to associate with the rest of society and are not allowed to mate. Today people who are overweight find themselves socially marginalized as well (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). This might be due to the fact that obesity is perceived as a sign of self-regulatory failure and taken as evidence that an individual is a poor group member. Indeed, the extent to which obesity is viewed as personally controllable is predictive of negative attitudes towards overweight individuals in a variety of cultures (Crandall et al., 2001). The social marginalization of those considered low in self-control continues. Taken as a whole, data on the heritability of self-control and social marginalization of those who are assumed to have poor self-control are consistent with the Vohs and Heatherton argument regarding an evolutionary origin to self-control, but a great deal more data needs to be gathered on this provocative proposition.

Effective Self-regulation benefits close relationships.

Effective self-regulation should benefit close relationships in two simple ways. It should contribute directly to the harmoniousness of interactions, for instance by enabling people to remain calm and positive in circumstances that might otherwise become unpleasant. It should also contribute indirectly to the overall well-being of the relationship by avoiding problems, for instance by helping people avoid extradyadic romance (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2006; Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004). Self-control is a valuable asset in getting along with people in general. Low self-control is related to aggression and violence in both adolescents (Feldman & Weinberger, 1994; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, White, & Stouthammer-Loeber, 1996) and adults (Avakame, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Latham & Perlow, 1996). In contrast, high self-control in children predicts better social functioning (Eisenberg et al, 1997; Fabes et al, 1999) and popularity (Maszk, Eisenberg, & Guthrie, 1999).

One large-scale investigation into self-regulation specified several characteristics that are associated with self-control which impact one’s overall ability to get along with others (Tangney et al., 2004). These researchers found that poor self-control contributed
to a number of psychopathological symptoms with the potential to disrupt interpersonal harmony, including hostile anger, paranoid ideation, somatization, depression, anxiety, and psychoticism.

In contrast, the benefits of self-regulation on close relationships was clearly demonstrated, beginning with the finding that people with good self-control reported better family cohesion, fewer family conflicts, and a more secure attachment style (although this finding is also consistent with our position that good close relationships improve self-control). In addition, good trait self-control corresponded with empathic perspective taking. Empathic perspective taking is the ability to step outside one’s own point of view, which is an important trait to mutual understanding and to the success of a relationship (Davis & Oathout, 1987). Results also showed that self-control is correlated with other characteristics that improve relationship functioning, including low-levels of anger, low levels of interpersonal aggression, effective anger management, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and taking responsibility for one’s mistakes. Finally, moderation in alcohol consumption—a trait with clear implications for the well-being of close relationships—was shown to correspond with self-control. The conclusion of the Tangney et al. (2004) data seems to be that self-control supports a variety of pro-relational dimensions, consistent with our position.

A classic study on children’s capacity to delay gratification offers support for the benefits of self-regulation for relationships (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). The study began by giving children between the ages of four and five a simple choice: they could take one marshmallow immediately, or they could wait and receive two marshmallows. Two marshmallows are clearly more attractive than one marshmallow, at least for preschoolers. The temptation of the smaller reward was too much for many children, who selected immediate gratification over the better reward. The amount of time the children took before taking the smaller reward was recorded, which constituted the measure of self-control. Ten years later, these children were assessed for social competency, among other variables. Children who showed good self-control at that young age showed more social competency in their adolescence than did the children who quickly took the one marshmallow. This is evidence not only that self-regulation impacts relationships, but that the association is enduring.

Of course, people all have moments in which their behavior falls short of ideal. Selfishness invariably leads to acts that hurt one’s partner, even among the most dedicated and considerate mates. If an otherwise thoughtful wife temporarily loses her temper with her husband, the offended husband might feel a keen urge for justice and retaliation. However, it is after a hurtful act by one partner that the other partner’s self-control appears of vital importance (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). How the offended partner responds to the hurtful act has profound effects on the well-being of the relationship (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). The term accommodation refers to the willingness to inhibit destructive responding in favor of constructive responding, after one has been offended by one’s partner (Rusbult et al., 1991).

The impulse to respond to a partner’s hurtful behavior with further negativity is often strong. To respond without negativity (or, optimally, with kindness and love) is difficult, costly, and effortful (Rusbult et al., 1991; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). If one does not have the necessary self-regulatory resources to accommodate, there will be no
accommodation and the harmful behavior will be reciprocated. Finkel and Campbell (2001) demonstrated a positive correlation between trait self-control and accommodation across four studies. Thus, people who have good overall self-control respond better to their partner’s missteps than do people with poorer trait self-control. These researchers also investigated state self-control. They discovered that when self-control resources were intact, participants in a relationship generally reported that they would accommodate in response to a partner’s missteps. However, when participants were required to exert self-regulatory resources in order to suppress their emotions while watching an emotion-provoking video, there was a subsequent decrease in self-reported willingness for accommodation. The importance of self-control in responding to a partner’s transgressions was supported by Vohs and Baumeister (2006), who showed that ego depletion caused destructive responses to a partner’s hypothetical transgressions. This reciprocity of negativity among ego-depleted participants held true when they were thinking about current, past, and hypothetical relationships. This is an excellent demonstration of the importance of both trait and state self-control in the functioning of relationships.

Vohs and Baumeister (2005) also demonstrated that state self-control can affect whether people blame their partners for a shared failure or whether they take individual credit for a shared victory. This has been described as the self-serving bias, which is the tendency to view oneself as responsible for success while seeing external factors (such as one’s partner) as responsible for failures (Sicoly & Ross, 1977). Couples worked together to create a structure out of blocks, and they were given either positive or negative feedback regarding how creative they had been. Ego-depleted participants viewed themselves as more responsible for the positive feedback and viewed their partners as more responsible for the negative feedback. Among participants whose self-regulatory resources were intact, this trend was absent and they were able to dole out both blame and credit in a relatively fair and even-handed way.

A recent investigation provides strong evidence for the importance of trait self-control to the survival of a relationship (Vohs, Baumeister, & Finkenauer, 2006). Given that people vary on trait self-control from what can be considered low to moderate to high levels, there are several reasonably plausible combinations of partners’ trait self-control that might best predict a relationship outcome. It is conceivable that partners with complementary levels of trait self-control would be ideal, such that a partner with high self-control would be best matched with a partner with low self-control. It is also plausible that similar levels of self-control would best predict relationship outcomes, such that the best mate for someone with low self-control would someone with similarly low self-control. However, this study revealed that the summed total of two partner’s self-control best predicts relationship outcome. Two partners with high trait self-control are most likely to have a successful close relationship. This also means that any relationship is better off if at least one of the partners has high trait self-control, although two partners high in self-control is the ideal. The linear trend also indicates that there is no apparent drawback to increasingly effective self-regulation.

**Sexual Restraint**

Failure to curb one’s sexual appetites can do great harm to a romantic relationship. Extradyadic sexual activity can introduce serious, tangible problems such as
disease and unwanted pregnancy. In relationships where a couple agrees on sexual exclusivity, there is also a risk of jealousy, resentment, and feelings of betrayal. Engaging in an extradyadic relationship has been described as one of the most damaging behaviors to a relationship (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Even when a couple agrees to tolerate extradyadic sexual activity, it seems to present a risk factor for future breakups (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). To be sure, none of these findings establishes the extradyadic activity directly causes harm to relationships, but the assumption that it does is widespread and plausible. The likely harm done by sexual infidelity to relationships may be the reason extradyadic sexual relationships are viewed negatively in a variety of cultures (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995). Suppressing impulses to engage in sexual activity with alternative partners may contribute to helping sustain intimate relationships, as is suppressing the urge to consider alternative partners. To be sure, societal norms exert pressure to express one’s sexuality in a socially appropriate way. However, the presence or absence of norms alone is insufficient to explain a great deal of sexual behavior including behavior that is contrary to norms, such as infidelity. This section will review evidence that self-control is relevant to the control of sexual behavior, especially for relationship partners.

Behaviors that demonstrate an inability to effectively self-regulate, such as immoderate alcohol consumption, drug addiction, and overeating, are correlated with a lack of sexual restraint and sexual misbehavior (Koepp, Schildbach, Schmager, & Rohner, 1993). In fact, poor self-control is central to the definition of a sexual control disorder (Wiederman, 2004).

The role of self-control on sexual restraint has also been demonstrated in laboratory studies. Ego depletion caused participants to gaze for a longer time at sexually appealing people in a magazine than did participants who were not ego-depleted (Vohs & Baumeister, 2005). Although one might expect that being in a relationship would decrease how much time participants spent looking at sexually attractive people in the pictures, the effect of ego-depletion was even greater for participants who were in a relationship. Thus, people in a state of weakened self-control have limited ability to suppress the consideration of alternative sexual partners, as compared to people with their self-control resources intact. Although gazing at attractive potential mates might sound harmless, the consideration of alternative mates weakens commitment to a current relationship and can result in relationship dissolution (Rusbult, 1980).

Gailliot and Baumeister (2006) found that both trait and state self-control facilitated the suppression of sexuality across several studies. Low trait self-control was found to be correlated with higher self-reported sexual activity, more sexual thoughts, and greater self-reported willingness for infidelity. Ego depletion caused participants to solve word puzzles using more sexual words and led to an increase in self-reported willingness for infidelity in hypothetical circumstances. Further, ego depletion caused sexually inexperienced dating partners to engage in more sexual acts of physical intimacy than they had done previously in a laboratory setting. In addition, retrospective accounts showed that respondents’ inability to restrain their sexual impulses frequently occurred during times of self-regulatory exertion (as in a sexual indiscretion occurring during a diet). Clearly, state self-control has important implications for relationships that value sexual exclusivity.
In summary, there is some evidence supporting the benefits of self-control to close relationships. We are yet to come across data supporting the proposition (i.e., Kremen & Block, 1998) that the benefits of self-control are curvilinear, or in other words that self-control ceases to be an advantage and becomes a liability in the highest ranges (at a cost to spontaneity, for example). When it comes to the functioning of a relationship, the existing evidence shows that self-control is unambiguously beneficial.

Positive close relationships benefit self-regulation

A Bidirectional Relationship

The authors’ contention is that self-control not only benefits one’s relationships, but that good relationships enhance one’s self-control. The favorable effect of self-control on relationships is more established in the literature than the benefits of close relationships on self-control, but there is emerging evidence for our position. An early demonstration of the bidirectional causal relationship between self-control and self-presentation was provided across eight studies by Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005). Although self-presentation is admittedly not the same thing as a close interpersonal relationship, self-presentation is a key part of maintaining relationships (Leary, 2001). First, Vohs et al. (2005) demonstrated the role of self-control in self-presentation. Consistent with the idea that self-control is required for effective interpersonal interactions, results showed that tasks resulting in ego-depletion resulted in self-presentation degradation. Specifically, these researchers found that participants who had decreased self-control resources made poorer first impressions than those with self-control resources intact. They then assessed the impact of effortful self-presentation on self-control by assigning participants to present themselves in a manner counter to habitual patterns or not. Results showed that effortful presentation resulted in a temporary decrease in self-control resources, as measured by decreased persistence on an unsolvable puzzle. This suggests that the relationship between self-control and interpersonal processes goes in both directions.

Developmental psychology provides evidence which relates more directly to the benefits of close relationships on self-regulation. Following Baumrind’s (1971) classifications of parenting styles, permissive parents are reluctant to correct inappropriate behavior in favor of a more “hands-off” policy. In contrast, authoritative parents set consistent limits for their children, and do so in an environment of dialogue and warmth. Experimental evidence indicates that these differing styles of parenting appear to influence children’s development of self-control (Mauro & Harris, 2000). In this laboratory study, parents asked their preschool age children to refrain from touching a brightly wrapped present. The parents then left the room, and the children were surreptitiously observed. Children raised by mothers who employ an authoritative parenting style were better able to resist touching the tempting gift than were children raised by permissive mothers. In other words, a parenting style more indicative of warmth and closeness was correlated with better self-control in children. Researchers using different methods likewise found a child’s developmental context to be related to self-control (Neitzel & Stright, 2003). In this study, children and mothers interacted as the children completed a preliminary task. Mothers were observed as they interacted with their child during this first task. Those mothers who provided positive emotional
support and encouragement had children who were more persistent and more successful at the second task, given months later, than were the children of less supportive mothers. Thus, positive parental interactions corresponded with better self-regulation during early development.

The impact of healthy parent-child relationships on self-control is also seen in the problem behaviors that children avoid as well as the positive behaviors children engage in. Children and teens (age 9-17) that have healthy and positive relationships with their parents are less likely to have problems with both alcohol and marijuana (Coombs, Paulson & Richardson, 1991). Similarly, the more frequently college students speak with their mothers about drinking, the less likely they are to engage in binge drinking (Turrisi, Wiersma & Hughes, 2000). While these correlational studies are consistent with our hypotheses that close relationships benefit self-control, the directionality cannot clearly be determined.

A number of studies have shown that being raised by both a mother and a father corresponds with higher academic performance and achievement (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Hetherington, Camara, & Featherman, 1983; Keith & Finlay, 1988; Mulkey, Crain, & Harrington, 1992). In other words, children who have the benefit of two close parents outperform children who have a single close parent. Of course, we are not suggesting that single parents are somehow not as close to their children than are couples, but children raised by couples do have one more close parental relationship. To be sure, there are factors other than self-control that may influence this finding, but it is nevertheless quite likely that self-control plays a central role in the superior academic achievement in two-parent homes. In short, this finding is consistent with our hypothesis but must be interpreted with appropriate caution.

These studies provide evidence that the family environment in which one is raised has implications for one’s ability to self-regulate. Such findings are confirmed by a retrospective analysis of adult populations. Researchers have found that trait self-control is higher among people who report having been raised in a positive family environment than it is among people who are raised in dysfunctional families (Tangney, Baumeister & Boone, 2004), although it is conceivable that trait-self control could have biased recollections.

We have principally interpreted the parental influence on behavioral problems as indirect, or through the development of self-control, rather than directly, such as by teaching children specifically the merits of education. In other words, while the benefits of close parental relationships on children’s behavioral problems can be described in terms of the development of one general trait, self-control, the benefits of parental influence could also be explained in terms of the development of specific faculties that directly influence the individual child’s behavior. Researchers recently tested the question of whether parenting behaviors directly or indirectly (via self-control) influence adolescents’ emotional and behavioral problems (Finkenauer, Engles, & Baumeister, 2005). Over 1300 adolescents responded to questionnaires regarding self-control, their parents, and the frequency and seriousness of behavioral and emotional problems.

Consistent with our thesis, one primary finding of this study is that parenting styles, assessed by the parenting style index (Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1994), demonstrating a high level of acceptance (i.e., “I can talk to my parents about my problems”) and a low level of psychological manipulation (i.e., “My parents treat me
coldly when I fail at school”) resulted in higher levels of self-control in children. Self-control in children was found to be strongly related to a reduction of both behavioral problems (delinquency and aggression) and emotional problems (depression, self-esteem, and stress). However, while self-regulation did contribute to positive emotional and behavioral factors in unique ways (unrelated to parenting style), parenting style also uniquely contributed to these factors. In other words, parental closeness benefits children through an indirect contribution via the development self-control, but also a direct influence independent of self-control.

We think that these findings are of great value to practice as well as theory. The two main traits that have been shown to contribute broadly to success in life are self-control and intelligence. Decades of interventions and experimentation have thus far failed to produce anything that is proven to yield lasting gains in intelligence, and it may be that the genetic contribution to intelligence sets an upper limit that socializing experiences are essentially unable to raise. (Admittedly, abuse, neglect, and deprivation can cause children to grow up less intelligent than their genes would have allowed.) In contrast, self-control seems much more amenable to learning and improvement. Hence instilling and strengthening self-control may be the most valuable way that parents, teachers, and others can enable children to succeed better.

**Automatic Self-control Resource Replenishment**

Close relationships may be particularly useful in mitigating ego depletion. Researchers have found that bringing one’s family to mind boosts self-regulation among participants who have had their self-regulatory resources drained (Stillman, Tice & Baumeister, 2006). In one study, participants in the control condition were given a monotonous orthographical task, while participants in the ego-depletion condition were given a similar or orthographical task that was both monotonous and cognitively demanding. Participants were then supralimininally primed either with family-relevant words or control words. The priming occurred when participants constructed sentences out of a small list of words, which in the family-relevant condition contained family words like “daughter” and “father”, or neutral words. The priming of family relevant words was done to bring about the psychological presence of loved ones. Last, all participants were asked to create as many words as possible from a list of scrambled letters, with no time limit indicated. Because participants could quit the task any time they wanted to, the number of words they created was at least partly dependent upon self-control, and in general participants in the depletion condition created fewer words. However, the number of words participants created in the ego-depletion condition was affected by whether they had received the family prime or not, as revealed by statistically significant interactions. Ego-depleted participants who were primed with the family (in other words, participants who were in the psychological presence of loved ones) created more words than did ego-depleted participants who were given the control prime, indicating that bringing the family to mind ameliorates state self-control.

A second study found similar results using subliminal primes. Rather than being presented with general family-related words such as “sister,” participants in this study were presented with the terms they used to refer to loved ones, such as “Debra” or “Mommy.” To do this, all participants were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their preferences for certain letters of the alphabet prior to entering the lab where the
actual experiment would take place. The questionnaire explained that to help account for biased answers, participants were asked to provide the names of close loved ones. The responses were surreptitiously entered into a computer that would later be used by the participants. Thus, in the family-relevant condition, participants who call their fathers “Daddy” would be subliminally presented with the word “Daddy” as they completed either an ego-depleting task requiring persistent thought control or a control task. In general participants subjected to the ego-depletion condition created fewer words than in the control again. Again, among depleted participants those who received the family-related prime created more words than did participants who received a neutral prime as revealed by a significant interaction. These researches also sought to determine whether the closeness and warmth of participants’ relationships to their families would influence the effect priming family-related concepts, however nearly every participant reported a positive relationship with their family in general (although some had ill feelings toward particular family members). This remains an intriguing question.

Although an important amount of self-regulation aimed at maintaining or improving a relationship most likely occurs on a conscious level, the subliminal priming study is evidence that self-regulation of some kind occurs automatically and nonconsciously in the psychological presence of family. Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) found similar self-regulatory benefits from both the conscious and nonconscious psychological presence of loved ones. They found that when participants were primed with important relationships, the participants put more effort into understanding someone’s behavior, worked harder on a verbal task, and were more willing to help an experimenter than controls. This too is supportive evidence for the benefits of close relationships on state self-control, although the Fitzsimons and Bargh investigation was not designed specifically to assess state self-control and it therefore lacked an ego-depletion manipulation.

These studies suggest that bringing one’s loved-ones to mind helps boost state self-control. This temporary boost in self-control might be one reason it is so common to see pictures of people’s family everywhere people work—from cabs to cubicles. Work is almost inherently depleting, and thoughts of one’s close relationships provide a buffer against ego-depletion. The underlying mechanism for this is not clear, although it is presently under investigation (Stillman, Tice & Baumeister, 2006). One possible reason that the psychological presence of loved ones would mitigate the effects of ego depletion is that thoughts of loved ones might cause a positive mood, and positive mood is associated with improved self-control (Tice, Bratslavsky & Baumeister, 2001). On this view, the observed effect would be more due to affect than to relational connectedness. If this is the reason for the reduction of ego depletion, then ego depletion would be reduced as much in people primed with family words as those primed with non-family words of equally positive valence. Another possibility is that social connectedness in general is the mechanism by which priming the family improves self-regulation. If this is the case, then priming words suggesting general connectedness should result in a self-control boost similar to that of family-related words. Although the proposition that bringing to mind close relationships is unique in its capacity to improve state self-control is intriguing, there is not yet sufficient evidence to rule out other interpretations.

While all important relationships require some form of self-regulation, it is logical that specific relationships call for different kinds of self-regulation goals. For example,
sexual fidelity is a more important goal to one’s romantic relationships than it is to one’s friendships. Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) demonstrated empirically that people do have different self-regulation goals associated with different relationships. Participants who had previously stated that they wanted to make their mothers proud performed better on a verbal task when primed with thoughts of their mothers, while participants who did not have this goal vis-à-vis their mothers did not show improvement. Similarly, participants who were primed with the name of their best friend were more understanding of a stranger’s behavior than were participants who were not primed with a best friend’s name.

Social Exclusion

A different approach to studying the link between self-control and close relationships is to examine the effects of social rejection or exclusion. If close relationships benefit self-control, one would also expect the absence of relationships, or social exclusion, to harm self-control. This hypothesis was central to the recent investigation by Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Twenge (2005).

The first part of that investigation was simply intended to confirm that social exclusion would impair self-regulation. This was shown with multiple different methods. A sense of social exclusion was created in some studies by giving people bogus feedback on a personality test, specifically telling them that their responses indicated that they were the sort of person who was likely to end up alone in life — over time, their friends would disappear, their romances and marriages would be short-lived, and they would end up spending more and more time alone. In other studies, rejection was manipulated by having participants talk together in a group to get acquainted and then privately rate which other people they would like to be paired with for an upcoming task — then telling some participants that nobody in the group had chosen them as someone with whom they would like to be paired. Both of these manipulations led to poorer self-regulation, as compared to various control conditions. That is, the socially excluded people showed poor self-regulation in the sense that they ate more snack food (cookies), consumed less of a healthy but bad-tasting beverage, and gave up faster on a frustrating task. They also performed worse on a dichotic listening task, which requires people to don headphones and screen out information being recited in one ear so as to concentrate on what they hear in the other ear. (Dichotic listening tasks measure the control of one’s attention, and so the poor performance by rejected people shows an inability to concentrate and focus on what is important.)

Thus, social exclusion leads to poor self-regulation. But why? There were several possible theories. One was that social rejection makes people too emotionally upset to control themselves or concentrate. That is, socially excluded participants were too emotionally distressed to do self-regulate. This is not wholly inconsistent with our hypothesis, but it would necessitate some revision. Past work has demonstrated that emotional distress damages self-regulation (Rosenthal & Marx, 1981; Tice et al., 2001; Wegener & Petty, 1994). However, there was no evidence for this. Excluded people responded more with emotional numbness than with intense emotional distress. Another possibility is that the rejection experienced by participants was simply a form of bad news, and their self-control failure was not due to social exclusion but rather getting negative feedback. However, a control condition in which participants were told bad
news about their future (that they would most likely break many bones) yielded no such self-regulation failure. Thus, these results cannot be explained simply in terms of giving participants unwelcome feedback. Another possible reason for the impaired self-regulation of rejected participants is that their self-esteem was damaged, thereby lowering their confidence in their ability to perform well. However, state self-esteem was specifically monitored in one study, revealing that there were no reliable changes to self-esteem and that self-esteem was not related to the self-regulation measure.

Yet another theory was that rejection somehow directly disables the complex mental apparatus needed for self-control. There were several versions of this theory, including the very appealing idea that people who are rejected use up all their self-control energy trying to cope with the threat to their self-esteem and trying to make sure they don’t have an emotional outburst. (That could explain the lack of emotional distress — perhaps people who get rejected find it upsetting, but they exert self-control to keep from breaking down and crying in the lab.) These ideas would all predict that rejected people would be fully unable to self-regulate, as opposed to being merely unwilling to exert themselves. To test that idea, Baumeister et al. (2005) repeated one of the experiments with the twist that some participants were offered a cash reward if they could perform well on the dichotic listening task. To the surprise of the investigators, the rejected people performed just as well as non-rejected ones when there was a cash reward at stake. This showed that exclusion does not really destroy or disable the capacity for self-regulation. Rejected people can self-regulate if they have a sufficient (selfish) reason to do so. Apparently, rejected people are normally just unwilling — rather than unable — to self-regulate. The implications of this unwillingness are relevant to a theory called “the implicit bargain.”

The Implicit Bargain

Research findings about self-regulation and exclusion, especially those covered in the preceding section, have pointed toward what has come to be called the “implicit bargain” theory to link self-regulation and belongingness. This view is receiving increasing attention, although more research is needed. Hence let us describe it, though it is a bit more complicated than the other theories.

The implicit bargain theory starts by recognizing that self-regulation is costly to the self. It consumes effort and energy, so it is hard work. Moreover, it often requires frustrating or depriving the self. That is, most self-control is used for resisting temptation or making yourself do something you do not want to do. People use self-control to pull themselves out of bed when they would rather go back to sleep, to resist eating delicious but fattening food, to stifle their impulses to smoke or drink, to hold back their aggressive or sexual desires, and the like. In relationships, self-control may be used for holding one’s tongue, for going along with the partner’s wishes when one would rather do something different, for resisting the temptation to get romantically or sexually involved with a new partner, and the like. In a sense, the capacity for self-control is a capacity for frustrating yourself.

Why do people use self-control, if it is mainly hard work aimed at depriving themselves of what they want? The answer is that it helps them get other things that they want even more. In particular, people want to belong to groups and relationships, and self-control helps them do this. Baumeister (2005) has concluded that the key to
understanding human nature is that people evolved to belong to groups and relationships in new, more complex and far-reaching ways than any other animals. Self-control thus enables people to conform to social norms, moral principles, laws, group expectations, and other standards to a much greater degree than other animals. The payoffs are immense, because people get most of what they need from their group. As just one example, most animals get their food from the natural environment around them, but people get their food from each other (i.e., mediated by their social group and network).

The implicit bargain is therefore to make the efforts and sacrifices of self-control in exchange for enjoying the immense and powerful rewards of belonging to the group. Individuals might enjoy the freedom to run amok and do whatever they feel like at all times, but they also want the satisfactions of having someone love them and care for them, and part of making a relationship succeed is a matter of behaving well so that your partner remains loyal and committed.

The implicit bargain can thus break down on either side. Certainly there is no disputing the fact that poor self-control leads to social rejection. People who fail to control themselves (e.g., by impulsive, immoral, illegal, or reckless acts) are excluded in many ways. Lovers and spouses reject them. Employers fire them. Clubs expel them. Indeed, society as a whole excludes rule-breakers by putting them in prison, and there is evidence that poor self-control is the single most central aspect of the criminal personality (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

The other kind of breakdown — rejection leading to poor self-control — is less obvious, but it may be just as real and important. In a sense, that is what the studies by Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge (2005) showed. When people are rejected, they cease to be willing to make the efforts and sacrifices required for self-control. They are still capable of controlling themselves, if they have a selfish reason for doing so, but they do not seem willing to make the effort without that. And why should they? According to the implicit bargain hypothesis, the main purpose of self-control is to facilitate belongingness — and so if you not going to belong (as rejection shows), why bother making yourself follow external rules and be good according to what others think?

**Limitations**

Of the two propositions made in this chapter—that self-control benefits close relationships and that close relationships benefit self-control—the evidence that self-control improves close relationships is stronger. Yet it is conceivable that in some instances self-control might harm relationships. For instance, a teetotaler may exhibit good self-control, but is probably not the life of the party. Similarly, a student who devotes time and resources to academic excellence might find herself marginalized by friends who do not value educational achievements. Alternatively, someone who has recently made a decision to stop drinking or to improve their academic standing might find that close friends do not share these goals actually hinder their progress to their pursuits. These scenarios may appear to be inconsistent with the proposed hypotheses. However, they are perhaps more illustrative of the importance of shared goals than to a fundamental flaw in the proposed bi-directional relationship. In other words it is not self-control that directly hinders the relationship, but the particular expression of self control. Likewise, it is not the relationship that damages self-control so much as the contrasting goals of the couple that threatens the relationship.
Conclusions

Close relationships are among the most important aspects of human life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). So important are relationships to happiness, and even to survival, that people are willing to exert control over their impulses in order to maintain them. Thus, one important component to the harmonious functioning of a close relationship is self-control. However, this relationship is bidirectional. Healthy relationships foster self-control, while self-control suffers in poor relationships and following social exclusion.

There is room for a considerable amount of research to be done on this intriguing association. To begin with, the extent to which parental influence on self-control is socially influenced (such as through positive close relationships) as compared to genetic, is one vital question that remains unanswered, at least in our examination of the literature. There are several other fertile directions this research can take. For instance, an investigation into the relative impact of state as opposed to trait self-control on different aspects of relationship functioning might yield important insights into the specific role each plays in maintaining close relationships. While a great deal is yet to be understood about the nature of self-control and close relationships, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that self-control is helpful in maintaining healthy and happy relationships, and that close relationships ameliorate the regulation of behavior.
References


