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## The Secrets of Self-discipline

Phil Nuernberger, Ph.D.

Most of us feel that we don't have enough self-discipline. After all, if we did, we would accomplish all the things we always talk about doing, but never really do. Worse yet, we often use the term to indicate a difficult or unpleasant task that we really don't want to do.

We also realize, however, that self-discipline is the secret of success, and we often wish that we had more. And we envy those who at least appear to have a great deal of it.

Actually, we are all very disciplined. Every day we do and say the same things we did yesterday. We sit in the same places, we think about things in the same way, we dress in the same way, we eat in the same way. We are very consistent from one day to the next. In other words, we are creatures of habit. And while we usually don't think of it as such, this is very disciplined behavior.

Unfortunately, in many ways our discipline is for the wrong things, such as worry, procrastination, not exercising, and self-defeating thoughts. We develop bad habits, and every day we practice those habits. For instance, how many times did you worry about something today? And the day before? So every day you practice worrying. By now, you are probably very disciplined about worrying.

### Self-Discipline: Choosing our Habits

We don't lack self-discipline - we lack the awareness and skill to create the habits we really want. We rarely make conscious decisions about which habits we develop. Consequently, we are often disciplined about the wrong things, and discouraged about the self-discipline we desire.

Self-discipline is not punishment, nor forcing yourself to do something

unwanted. It is the ability to do what you choose to do. The secret lies in our ability to choose and develop the habits that give us the outcomes we desire.

Every skill, from surgery to football to selling to etiquette, is based on habit. We practice until the behavior becomes automatic for us. At that point, we simply perform. We don't think about our stance, our movements, or our thought patterns. We pay attention and let our habits (skills) do the work.

This applies to everything we do. If something is difficult, it simply means that we don't have a habit for it. If something is relatively easy, it means that we have developed the habit (skill) for it. If we take charge of our habits, we can create all the self-discipline we need.

Take exercise for example. We know that exercise leads to better physical and mental health, increases sex drive, enhances mood - and that's just for starters. We have every excuse not to exercise, but the reality is that we haven't developed the habit of doing so. If exercising was our habit, these excuses would not exist.

### Building Self-discipline

We can easily be disciplined if we take charge of our habits. Here are a few helpful points.

**1. Take time to introspect.** We need to take time to think about priorities, to contemplate the direction of our life, and consciously decide what we want. We must be clear about our goals if we want to build satisfying habits. Introspection provides insight, clarity, and a way to monitor progress and refocus our efforts.

**2. Be Positive.** Don't struggle against bad habits. Whatever you pay attention to becomes stronger, so focus on what you want to achieve and visualize the positive outcome clearly in your mind.

**3. Be Specific.** Consciously and clearly analyze what actions or behaviors will lead to the outcomes you want, then organize them into simple steps. Practice one behavior until it becomes a habit. Then begin the next step.

**4. Build Determination.** Keep your goal always present in your mind, and regularly remind yourself of the positive outcomes.

**5. Be Consistent in Your Practice.** All skills take time, but the key is consistency. Track your progress, and don't worry about how well you are doing. Show up for the job every day, and your skill will build.

**6. Enjoy.** Pay attention to your moment to moment experience. This creates interest. If your activity is interesting, you will enjoy it, and continue until you have the habit you want.

Self-discipline is not magic, it is the expression of skill. And each of us is uniquely qualified to achieve it.

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Where love rules, there is no will to power; and where power dominates, there love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other.  
Carl Jung

Human reason needs only to will more strongly than fate, and she *is* fate  
Thomas Mann