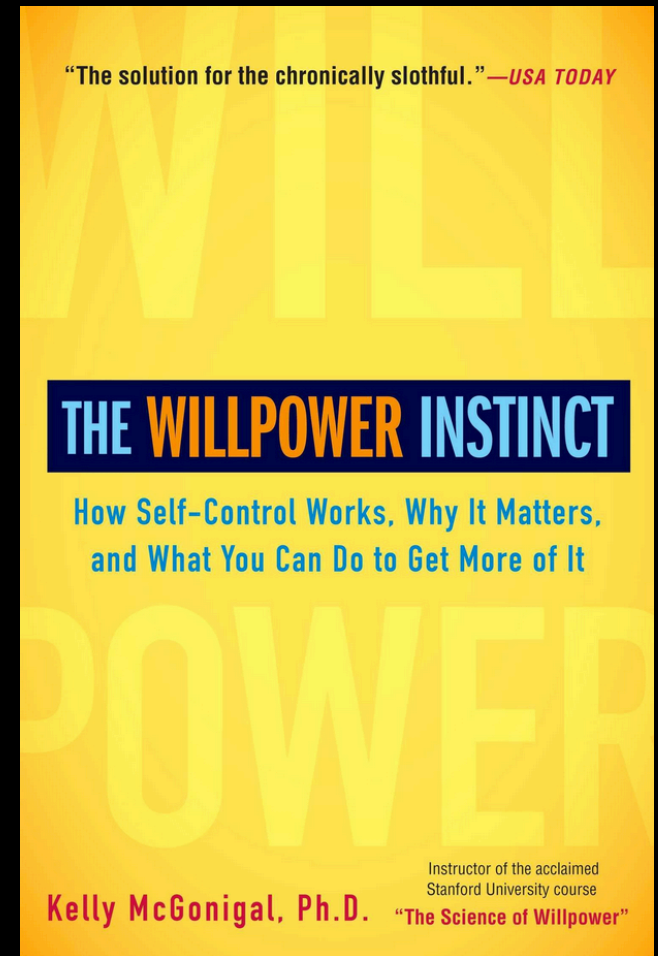


Book Report Series 2: The Willpower Instinct

By Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.



Patrick Drew

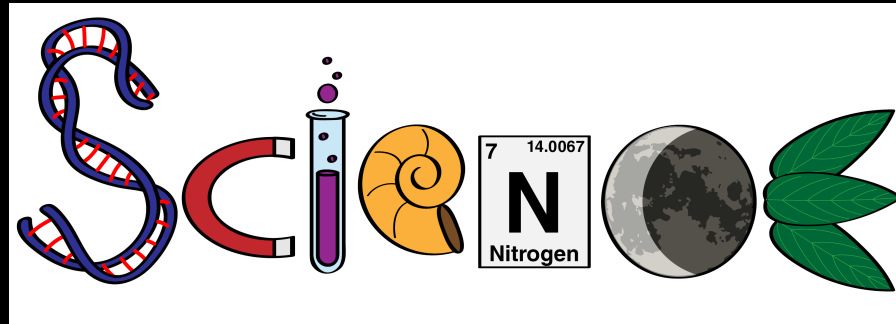
GSPS Feb 1, 2019

I'm excited to give this talk

- Because I need this information
- I have many willpower challenges that I fail at every day
- eat better, read more, work longer hours, waste less time, be less distracted, control my emotions, be more present, be a better partner, save more money, stick to long term goals
- I'm weaker than most, don't mistake giving this talk as having this figured out



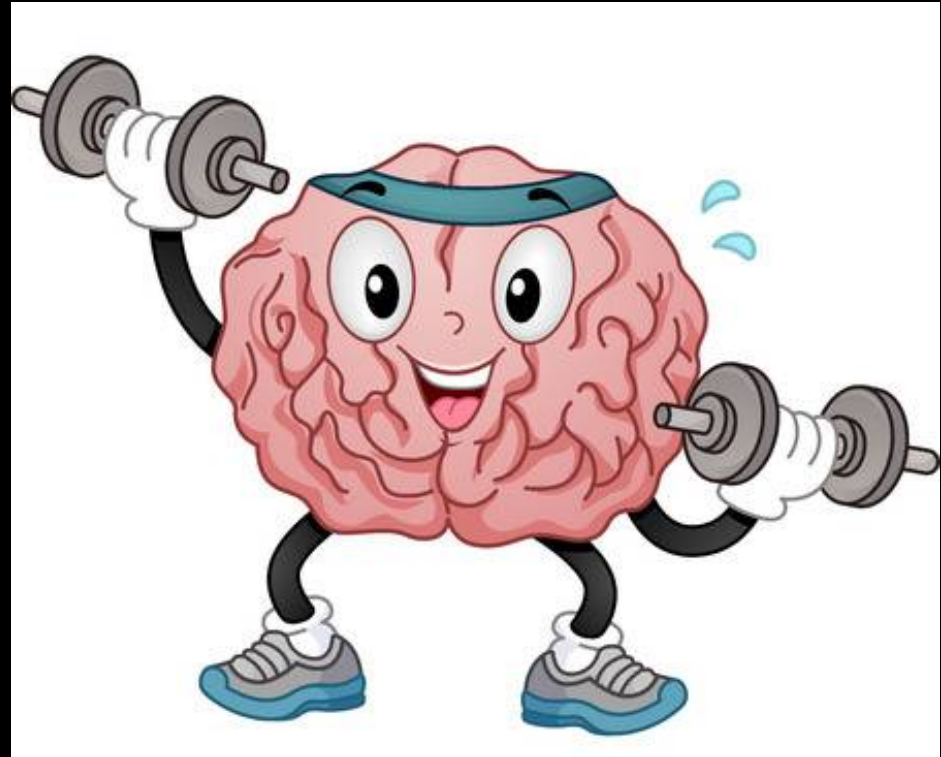
We're wrong about willpower



- Much of what we believe about willpower undermines and stresses us
- We'll focus on the current scientific understanding of willpower and how to more easily achieve goals.
- Good news: Easy reframing shown to make a big difference

3 types of challenges

- I will, I won't, I want
- Examples?



Two selves

- A competition between two of your selves.
- e.g. I want chocolate and I want a six pack. I want exercise and video games. I want ...



Two selves

- We typically identify with the version that wants something bad.
- “I’m really the person who wants to eat chocolate until I’m sick, and the part of me that knows I shouldn’t isn’t really me”

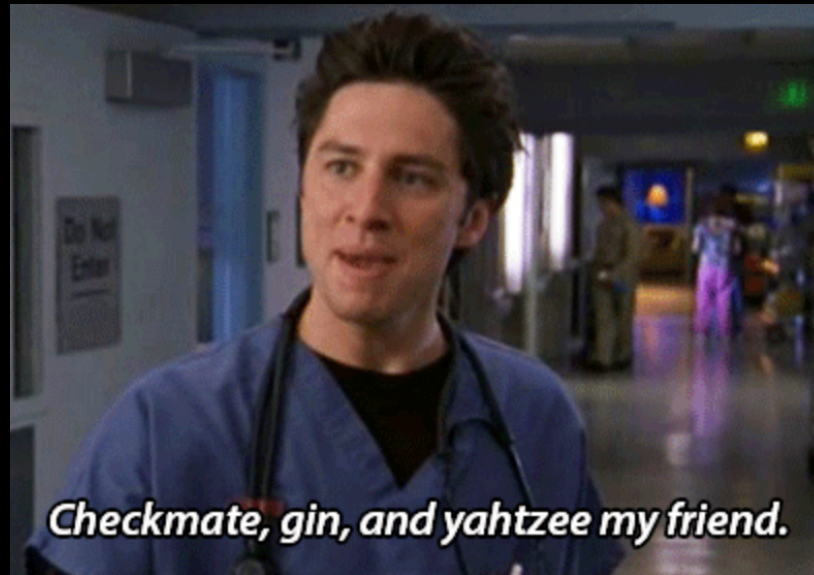


0th intervention: two selves

- Neurologically, experientially, you're both of those selves
- One self comes from one part of brain, other from another
- Realize you don't **have** to let one win over the other



0th intervention: two selves



- Research shows that the self that wins depends in given moment on: mindset, energy, stress levels, thoughts you just had, etc.

1) Sleep Intervention

- 55 recovering substance abusers in standard care, 23 completed mindfulness training to help increase sleep from 7 to 8 hours a day.
- More sleep -> less likely to relapse.
- Also amount of time meditating per day predicted resistance to relapse (only 10-15 minutes a day)



1) Sleep Intervention

- Things get much worse (for most people) with < 6 hours/night.
- PFC less active \rightarrow basic impulses and instincts more active.
- Harder to be your better self, easier to be worse self



1) Sleep Intervention



- Maybe sleep makes sense, but why meditation?

Some apps:

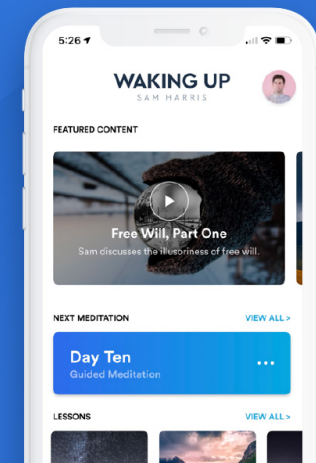
Meditation

- Don't mean to put anyone off
- If unfamiliar, probably not what you think it is
- Goal is not to stop thoughts (impossible), rather to notice thoughts as thoughts



10% HAPPIER
MEDITATION FOR FIDGETY SKEPTICS

WAKING UP
SAM HARRIS



Some apps:

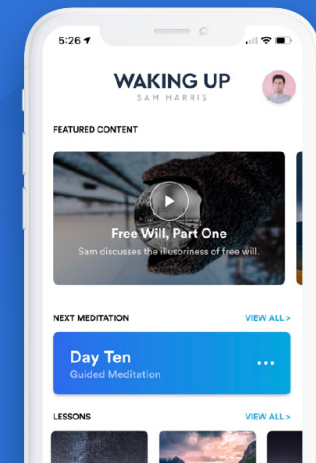
Why does it work?

- Practicing noticing thoughts as just thoughts allows you to detach.
- Urges lose some power if you pay close attention to them



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MEDITATION FOR FIDGETY SKEPTICS

WAKING UP
SAM HARRIS



2nd Intervention



- Think of a recent willpower failure.
- Does feeling bad about it make you less likely to do it again?
- Is it a good source of willpower?

2nd intervention

- Study of people trying to lose weight
- Eat donut when they arrive. Choose flavor so they feel complicit.
- Rank and evaluate a bunch of different candies.
- Told to eat as much as they want in order to evaluate.





- Between donut eating and taste test, half the dieters receive message:

“By the way, we’ve realized now that some people in this experiment feel guilty after eating the donut. We want you to remember that everyone indulges sometimes and we asked you to do it. Please don’t be too hard on yourself about it.”

2nd intervention



- Those given message ate half as much candy
- Feeling bad about failing makes you more likely to fail again

Something important going on here

- Feeling bad about failure puts brain in reactive, emotional state, thinking there's something about who we are that's wrong and weak
- Looking for a way to stop feeling bad, more likely to give in to instant gratification
- Instant gratification usually not aligned with your goal



Key points to tell yourself

- 1) everyone slips up sometimes
- 2) this doesn't say anything about who you are, rather about the process
- 3) what matters is how you respond after, not that it happened



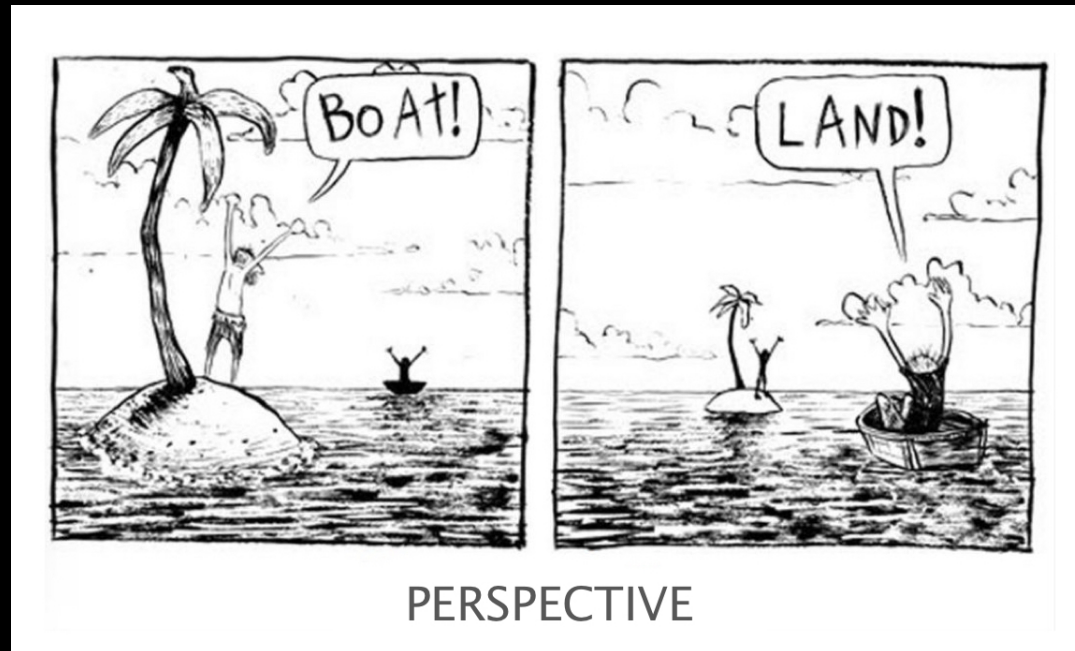
Subtle point

- Caution: not a license to justify a choice to do something “bad”
- e.g. I worked really hard earlier today, so I’m going to leave work early and not feel bad. Or I went to the gym today so I get to eat cake tonight and not feel bad.
- It’s: Once I notice I failed I forgive myself and the next choice I make is to realign myself with the better thing.

More on this later

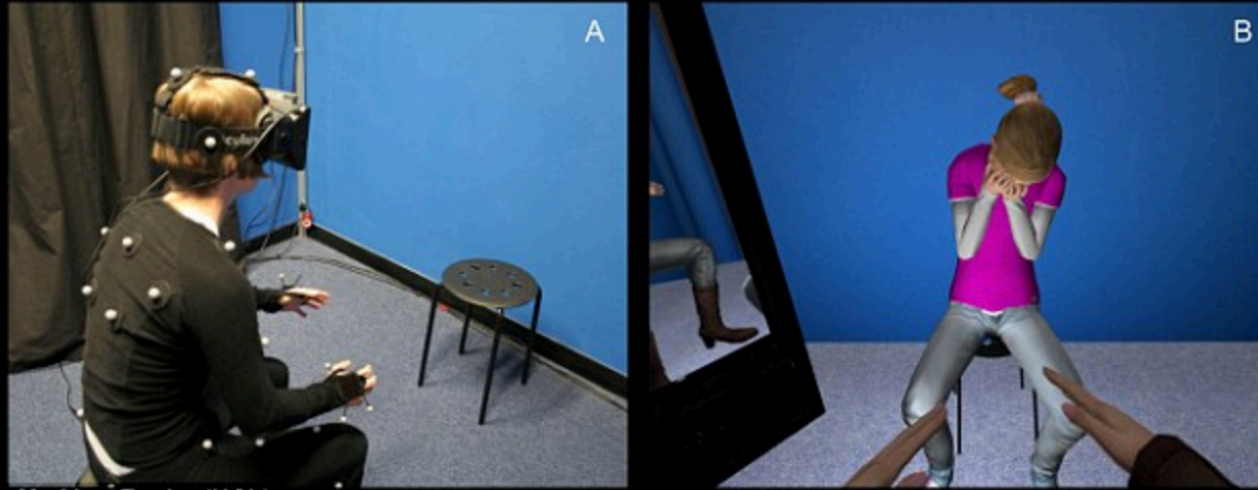


Worth mentioning twice



- Reframe from morals to goals.
- Being “good” gives you permission to be “bad”
- Forget virtue, focus on goals and values

3rd Intervention: future selves



- Interview future self (providing both questions and answers). e.g. “what’s important to you now that you’re retired?”
- Those that went through this exercise **allotted >2x more money** into retirement account (2nd phase done a few weeks later, so not so obvious)

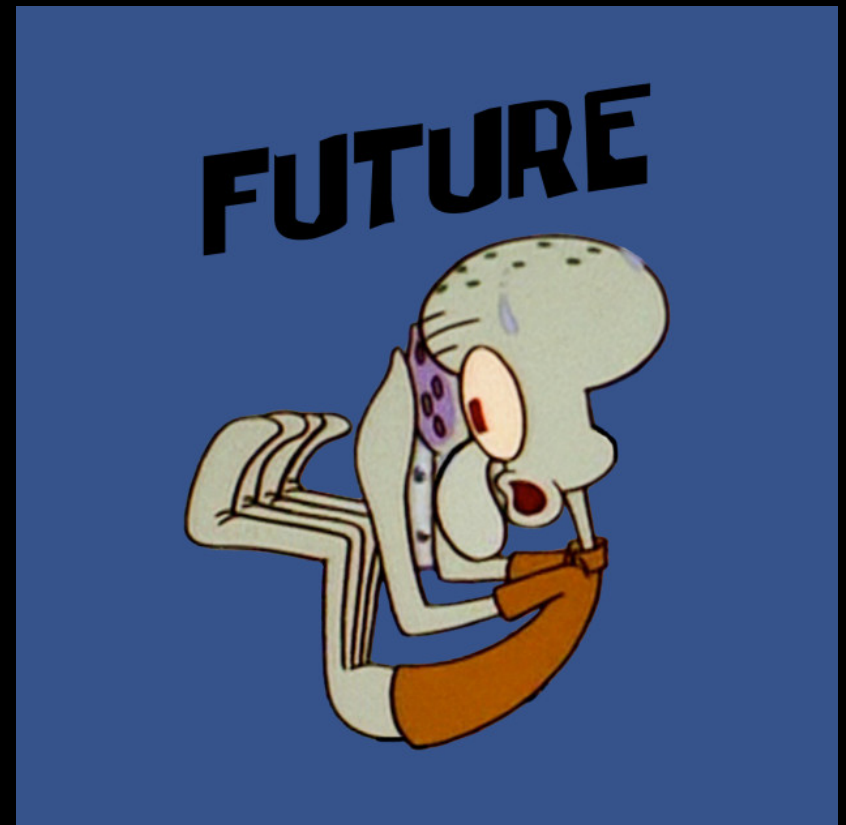
3rd Intervention: future selves

- The more you feel your future self is a stranger, the less likely you are to plan for their health and happiness.
- While we change, learn, and will be “a different person”, we will be the same human.



3) We are our future selves

- Those who can better imagine future self:
- Less likely to procrastinate, be late, more likely to make more ethical decisions at work, make more money, more likely to own their home outright, in less debt, have more retirement savings, more likely to floss, exercise, etc.



Studies show you can do it easily

- Write a letter from future self to present self
- Who you are, what you're doing, where you're living
- Or address a challenge you're dealing with now and how it turned out, why it mattered, and thanking you for sticking with it.



Or try this

- Study shows just imagining yourself grocery shopping in the future, what you'll like, what you'll be buying, imagining standing in the line to check out makes people plan better for their future happiness.
- Strengthens willpower, independent of the content of thought.



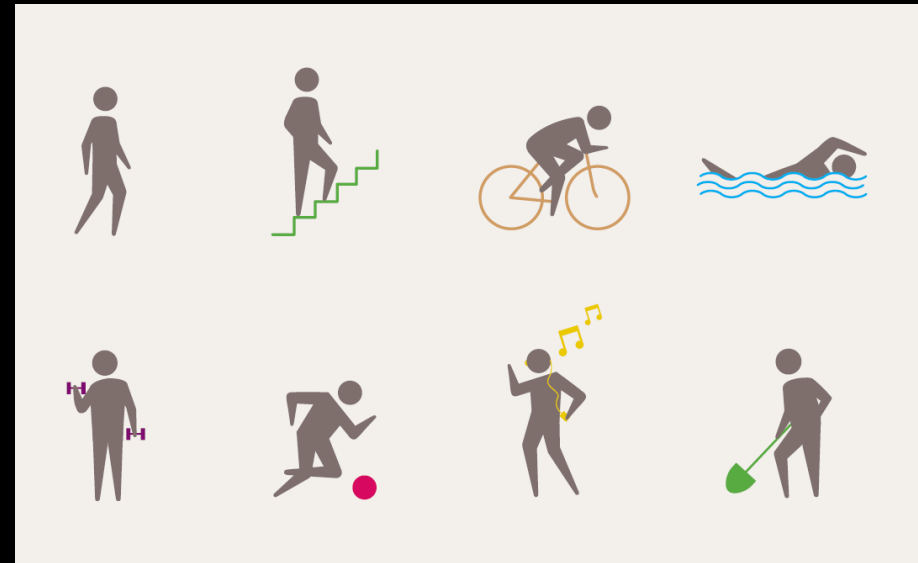
4th intervention: points of failure

- Group of people who want to exercise but don't.
- Half think about actual and imagined points of failure
- Immediately doubled amount of exercise over control, still doubled 4 months later.



Daily writing exercise

- Identify your goal
- What would be the most positive outcome?
- What action will I take to reach this goal?
- What is the biggest obstacle?
- When and where is the obstacle most likely to occur?
- What can I do to prevent the obstacle?
- What specific thing will I do to get back to my goal when this obstacle happens?



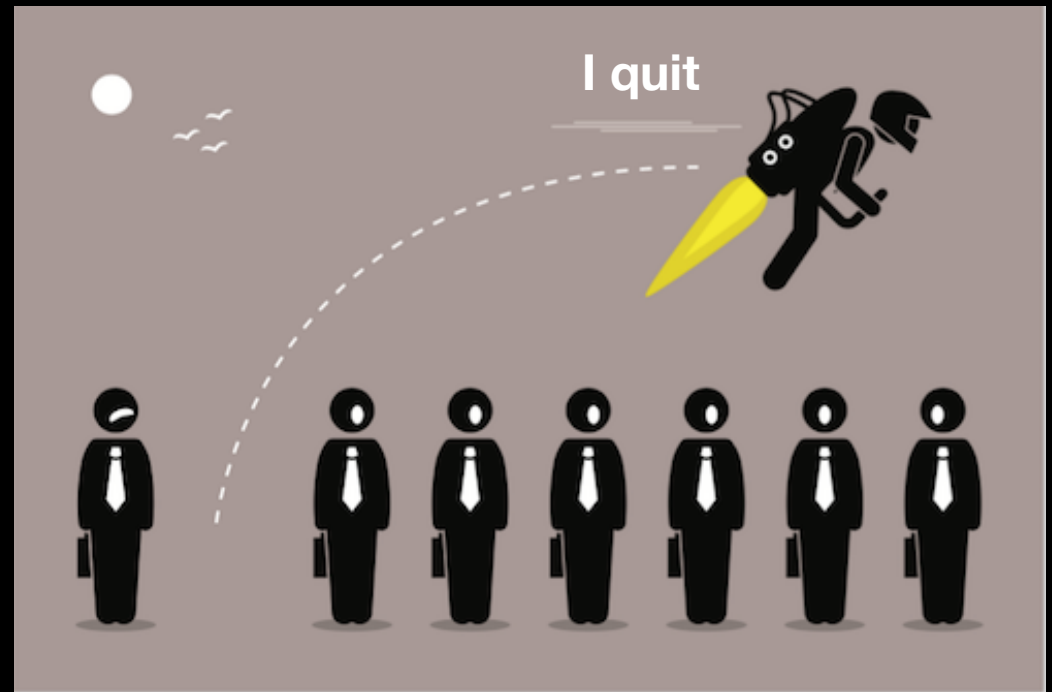
Round two: virtue vs goals

- Tracking points of failure leads to success. Tracking success leads to failure.
- Multiple studies show tracking your success leads people to slack off.
- Dieters much more likely to take chocolate if reminded of how doing great and close to their goal
- Tracking your mistakes (without judgement) keeps you on track.



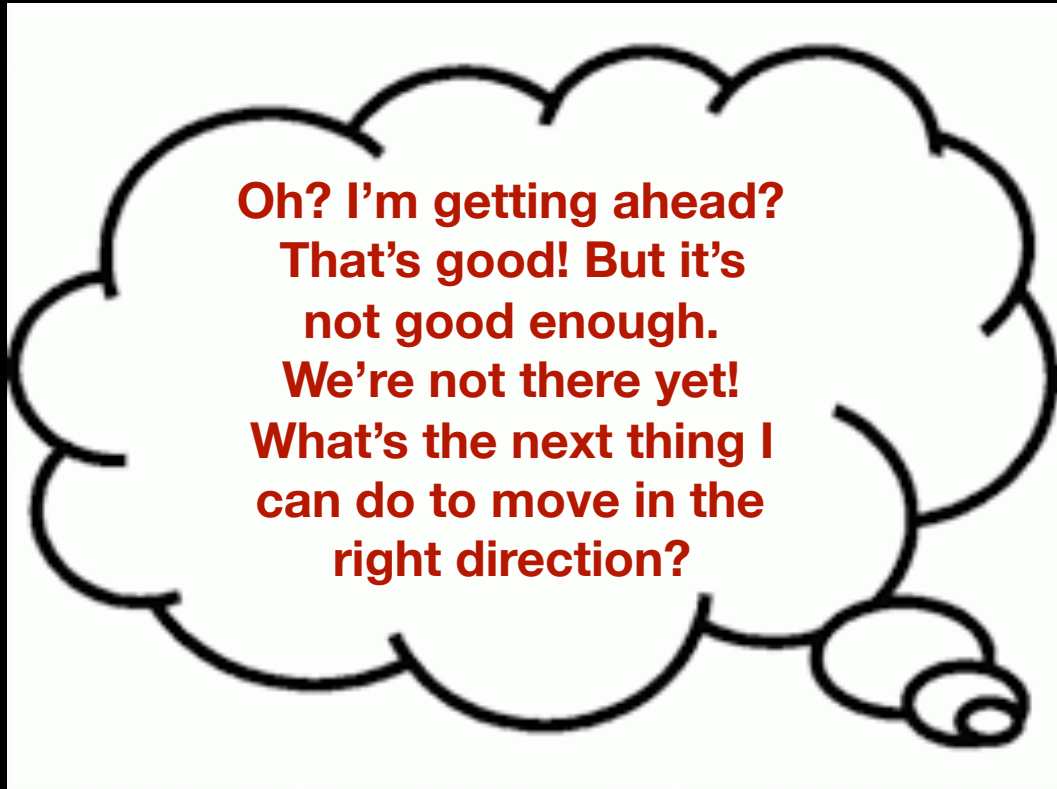
Doesn't sit well with many of us

- And we're partly right!
- There's layers of subtlety here. A dichotomy: acknowledge success and reframe in terms of goals.
- Because feeling you're never making progress is just as likely to make you quit!!



What's the right way?

- Common leadership advice that works on yourself: **Don't give praise without warrant, and don't give praise without reminder to step it up, run away with the ball, and fucking crush it**



Oh? I'm getting ahead?
That's good! But it's
not good enough.
We're not there yet!
What's the next thing I
can do to move in the
right direction?

5th intervention: surfing the urge

- Smokers smoking by 40%, even though researchers didn't ask them to
- Food study: 100% compliance for duration of study (48 hours).
- Also tripled the 1 year weight loss of (different) study participants.



Study participants told:

- Notice the thought, craving, or feeling
- Accept it. Be curious about what it feels like
- Breathe, pause, and plan
- Broaden your attention and look for the action that will help you achieve your goal



(Steps 1 and 2 are exactly meditation)

Summary: actions shown to increase willpower reserves



- Sleep more
- Meditate (just 10 minutes a day seems to work)
- Exercise
- Eat Low-glycemic plant-based diet

Summary: self interventions

- Don't feel bad about past failure - follow the script
- Be very careful with praise. It's easier to sabotage yourself than to increase willpower reserves
- Think about points of failure and ways to mitigate
- Reframe good/bad person to goals and values
- Exercises to make future self seem more real
- Surf the urge exercise. You don't have to act. Feelings are just feelings