



# Global Spa & Wellness Summit

JOINING TOGETHER. SHAPING THE FUTURE.

## Will Power

General Session: Panel

Wednesday June 6<sup>th</sup> 2012 2:30pm – 3:15pm

McNulty Gathering Room, Doerr-Hosier Center, The Aspen Institute

Speaker:

**Jessica Alquist**, Researcher, Florida State University, U.S. (works with Dr. Roy Baumeister, Author of *Willpower, Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*)

Transcription:

**Taylor Gannon**, Assistant Marketing Coordinator, Global Spa & Wellness Summit

So we use the terms will power, self-control, self-discipline. They all mean basically the same thing. I am going to use the term self-control because that is the one I am more comfortable with – it's the one we talk about in our papers – and it's probably one of the more familiar terms for most people. It is our ability to control our thoughts, our feelings and our behaviors.

During today's Summit, many have been talking about preventative disease and things that people can do differently in their lives that will make a huge difference in our health. I think that self-control is just fundamental to that – nothing happens without it. Psychology was always trying to find – at least currently – trying to find how to make people's lives better. For a while we thought it was self-esteem. We thought if we could just make people feel good about themselves, they could do all these great things, and everything would be great. Self-esteem did not pan out for us at all. If you want to talk about that later, I can definitely fill you in on that story.

**It turns out that self-control does seem to be that sort of magic skill we are looking for – the thing that we can foster in people that will really, really change their lives.**

How many of you have heard of the marshmallow experiment? Okay, some of you. So this is a really cool, classic study in self-control. They brought in four-year-olds, and they gave them each a marshmallow. Then they said, "if you can wait until I come back to eat that marshmallow, I will give you a second marshmallow." And they

measured whether the children were able to wait or not. If you ever could look up footage of this, you can tell they are exercising self-control. Four-year-olds do not hide that – they're rubbing it on their face, and they're looking at it really sadly.

So what they found – what was really, really cool and farsighted of these researchers – was that they followed these students into high school. They looked at their college admission exams – so in the U.S. that is the SAT – **and they found that the children that were able to wait for that second marshmallow did better on their college admission exams (so much better)**. On a 1200 point scale, they did about 200 points better on their SATs, if they were able to wait for that second marshmallow. So this was really exciting – and this brought in a whole cavalcade of really great research on the benefits of self-control. Self-control is a better predictor of college grades than the IQ test. This is very inspiring because your IQ doesn't seem to be that controllable but self-control probably is. Supervisors with better self-control are better rated by their subordinates than supervisors with poor self-control. People with better self-control report less depression, less anxiety and better relationships with the people they are close to. It seems to be a really broad skill that makes a huge difference in people's lives.

So one thing I think is good to know about self-control is how it works. I find it fundamentally interesting because it is what I study, but I think you will, too. So what we found is that self-control is actually a lot like physical strength – when you exercise a muscle, that muscle becomes fatigued. And there comes a point when you can't use it anymore. **We found that with self-control – after one act of self-control, it becomes harder for people to exercise self-control.**

One of the creative ways that researchers have studied this is with a cookies verses radishes study. They give the participants a plate that contained cookies and radishes, and they told some participants that they should eat the cookies and avoid eating the radishes. In the other group, the people were told to eat the radishes and to not eat the cookies, and they made sure that the cookies were warm and gooey. (We're very sadistic in our lab.)

In another study, we gave people unsolvable puzzles. We use unsolvable puzzles to measure persistence in the face of failure. And that's been a theme these past couple of days here at the Summit. I've heard a bunch of people talk about moving past failure and continuing to try because you're never going to succeed, if you stop trying. These puzzles are really unsolvable so they really are never going to succeed, but they don't know that. So what we found was that participants that had to eat the radishes and avoid the cookies then spent less time on the puzzles. So they were less capable to push through, to just keep working. They were likely to just come out after seven

minutes and say, “I’m done. I give up. Tell me what the answer is, I want to go home.” And that’s one of many studies that have showed this basic result. So they have used all different kinds of self-control, all different kinds of measure, and this seems to be the pattern that always emerges.

We’ve also found that decision-making taps into the same resources. So how many of you after long or stressful or [a] very self-attacking stressful day, go home, open the refrigerator and just stare? You have no idea what you are going to eat, or how you are going to make it happen.

Research shows that decision-making relies on the same resource that self-control relies on. And this works two ways – if you have people make a bunch of decisions in the lab, they then show poorer self-control. On the flip side, if you have people exert self-control or make a bunch of decisions and then make more decisions, they make poorer decisions. So first of all, if you let them, they will defer the decision – they will choose not to make the decision. But if you make them make a decision, they will go with the default option, they will choose the extremes, but they are choosing self-optimally in a variety of ways.

I’ve been thinking about being here at this conference – talking with you and learning. I’ve been thinking about all the different questions, what the different debates are in the spa industry and things like that. I think this is relevant to some of the discussion about what kinds of options should be available to customers, what kinds of menus should be available and things like that. **The idea is that decision-making does take resources, and so there is something about decision-making that may take away from the restorative process. And that may be only if it is overwhelming, but it’s something to think about.**

So self-control **being a limited resource** may seem like an excuse to fail at self-control. But there are really great ways of managing it, and that’s why knowing that it’s limited is really beneficial. Those ways are to conserve it, to replenish it and to strengthen it. I’ll go over the research for these various ways.

1. First of all, **conserve it**. One thing that they found with people with high self-control is that they experience temptation less often. And part of the reason is that **they structure their environment to not be overly tempting**. They don’t trust their self-control to take over everything. They don’t keep their house stuffed with junk food. They don’t put videos on the computer that they do work on. They keep their lives structured so that they’re not tempted unnecessarily. And I think this is a really cool idea – the idea of setting up our environment so that we succeed.

Another thing people can do to conserve resources is to make lifestyle changes sequentially. So people set New Year's resolutions – they come up with five or 20 things that they want to be different about their lives, and they try to do all of them at once. And because self-control is a limited resource, it's going to be very hard to eat your vegetables, be nice to that co-worker you don't like and go to the gym at the end of the day. It's just not going to happen.

So you can make those changes one at a time and, what's really cool, is that the research has shown that habits don't require self-control. So they did a diary study where they measured what people did in a day, how much self-control they exerted. And they found that people who were in a habit of going to the gym, didn't stop going to the gym when their self-control was taxed. People that weren't in the habit of going to the gym threw that idea out of the window first thing. But the idea is that habits happen relatively automatically. You don't have to force something as much to make it habitual, and that's what makes it not tax self-control resources. I think habits are a really exciting direction for making people's lives better.

What is really cool about the habit research – I have a tangent moment – is that if people want to change their behavior, the habit research shows that one of the best things to do for them is to go to a new environment, and that's what you guys are. You guys are a new environment. Where people can establish better habits and make changes in their lives because the things that cue their bad behavior aren't there.

2. **Replenish it.** So the research shows that self-control actually relies on glucose. When people exercise self-control, afterwards their glucose drops. When glucose is low, people are more likely to fail at self-control. And to really test this, we even did the same basic paradigm, where we had two acts of self-control to see how the first affects the second. We gave people lemonade in between the acts of self-control, and that lemonade was either sweetened with sugar or Splenda – the sugar will at least temporarily spike their glucose. And we found that people given the lemonade that was sweetened with sugar didn't show the same effect on the first act of self-control, on the second one – they didn't show depletion. So we say sugar works in the lab, not in the diet. And so we used sugar because we wanted something to metabolize very quickly and that we could measure quickly, so we could send our participants home because they don't want to wait there forever. But, the fundamental thing that comes out of this is that the brain needs fuel, and it uses a lot of fuel for self-control.

So what does this say about dieting? We don't know if dieting is the best use of self-control. By dieting I mean temporarily offer unsustainable changes in what people eat in the service of losing weight. The failure rate of dieting is enormous, especially if you look long term, if you look five years down the road. **We think part of the reason is that when people diet they are denying their body the very fuel they need to control their behaviors.** So it becomes very hard to do this really difficult thing – which is control yourself – when you're not giving your body the fuel it needs, your brain the fuel it needs to exercise that self-control.

3. The really promising thing about this research on self control – is that you can **strengthen it**. So earlier I talked about self-control being a muscle that gets fatigued after use. You can also build up the strength over time. There are these really cool studies, which they did in Australia, where they assigned people to a self-control practice condition. This crossed a bunch of different studies. In one study, participants were assigned to an exercise program. In another study, participants were assigned to a money management program. Another study assigned participants to use their non-dominant hand for brushing their teeth, opening door knobs and a couple other tasks. All of these things require self-control, and they found that, after a certain amount of time (there were different lengths of time for different studies but were at minimum two weeks), that participant's self-control improved. They were less “depletable.” A first act of self-control had less of an effect on a second act of self-control. They reported losing their temper less often. The people [who] were in the money management program still said that they spent less impulsively. The people [who] were in the exercise program were still exercising more. They were still building the self-control strength, and it was applying across their life. They were smoking fewer cigarettes.

There's a LIST of effects that came from the self-control program. And something I was thinking about the other day was that one of the speakers here at the Summit was talking about cultivating mindfulness in the guest, trying to get them to think of the moment while they are there. I think that that really fits well with your goals and the self-control practice. The idea of trying to focus ourselves on the moment takes self-control, and that's really a great kind of self-control practice because it has all the benefits that mindfulness already has.

I appreciate you guys listening to me talk on self-control. If you have any questions, you should absolutely ask me, but I'm really glad I got to share this today.

## Q & A with Jessica Alquist & Jeremy McCarthy

MARY TABACCHI: What comes first? Is it willpower or happiness? They have to interact because when I'm happy, I have got way more willpower. Can you explain? take it away.

JESSICA ALQUIST: There is no quick "which comes first," but there is evidence that happiness negates the effects of self-control. In some studies – on the effect of depletion – they'll come in and give someone a self-control task and then they'll come in and give them a little present. Then they will measure their self-control again and they don't show the depletion of the effect. So that's one way I think happiness definitely improves self-control.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: The other thing I would say, and Jessica touched on this in her presentation, is that mindfulness is kind of the intersection of those two things. In the last ten years I think mental health has really focused on happiness, you saw all the books – that has been a huge trend. I think in the next ten years, the focus will be mindfulness. Like Andrew Weil said, it's not about single-mindedly pursuing happiness, it's really about understanding your emotions and being able to use them to your advantage. The research that I talked about with Barbara Frederickson, she's found that **there is a ratio of three positive emotions to one negative emotion that is important for flourishing. What I think is interesting about that is that it is not 3 to 0.** It's not like we want to be happy all of the time because you get important information about the world from your negative emotions and about what is going on inside you and things that are going on around you. Mindfulness is kind of being able to globally look at all of that and, like Jessica touched on in her presentation, it's also that shifting of attention and being able to have the self-control to focus your attention on what makes sense based on what is most meaningful to you.

MARY TABACCHI: I remember in some of our discussions, Jeremy, you talking about two levels of happiness? Could you talk about that a little bit because I'm really interested in that, I want to be happy on both levels - go for it.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I think this is the problem with the word, happiness, and why we have heard different opinions about the word is that we use the word happiness all of the time, but it means different things, sometimes we use it in pleasure, like how we feel if we eat ice cream, or have sex, or do something that feels really good, but we also mean it to mean someone who is just generally in a good mood all the time [Jeremy points to Mary Tabacchi] or seems to have a bubbly personality, so it's more of a stable personality trait. We also use it to mean how we

feel about our life in general. Do we feel we have fulfilled our mission in life? I kind of describe it like there's the shallow end of the pool of happiness, which is more the superficial pleasure, but there's also that deep side of happiness, which is on your death bed, if you look back, would you feel happy about what you have accomplished and the life that you have lived. So there are both levels of that.

MARY TABACCHI: It's a balance. So Jessica, would willpower fit into both of those or maybe the longer range kind of happiness?

JESSICA ALQUIST: Willpower, I think, almost only fits into the long range view of it. There is some evidence that if people are primed to prioritize happiness, so if you set that as their goal, "do whatever stay happy right now," people will do all kinds of bad things for themselves and will do nothing that is good for them. A lot of things that are good for us maybe don't feel good in the moment, but may feel good in the long term. So happiness is really important, but maybe putting a lot of priority on that happiness as an individual can lead people a little bit astray, as far as if they're not willing to occasionally step out of that shallow end, they're never going to get to that deep end.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I agree. I think the way I see willpower – but it also ties into mindfulness – is when you come to a fork in the road and you have to choose between that in the moment happiness or that fork that goes towards something more meaningful and perhaps, long term fulfillment, the willpower is what is going to make you go down the right fork. **If you don't have the willpower then you are easily distracted by the momentary pleasure of short term happiness.**

MARY TABACCHI: I think as we have heard, people talking about life-coaching and behavior change, and so on and so forth, I think one of things that strikes me is that health is a journey. It's a long term thing. So when you are coaching people, or when you have people at your spa, or when you have people come to you and say, "I've tried to lose weight or I've tried to do whatever." We've just learned that dieting doesn't work; we just learned that there are a lot of things that really need to go into the long term. I think the question for both of you is "How do we convince people that the long term really works?" We are kind of wired for short term pleasure, short term results, and so when we read these ads: lose 22 pounds in three days, just drink my fancy detox drink - how do we get people around that, so they can see the long range?

JESSICA ALQUIST: I actually think that one of the best strategies is to set the goals more short term. I think that is something that people struggle with a lot, where there is this dichotomy between healthy and unhealthy people and we either have to be

doing everything right or you are doing everything wrong. **I think if there could be more of an emphasis on the short term, and say, “Next week I’d like you to eat a vegetable a day.” Let people set these very manageable short term goals.** Because I think it is really hard for people to look long term. **It’s fascinating that we are even able to manage ourselves fifty years in the future. As far as we know no other animal does that. I think it may be better to make our goals more in line with how we think than try to push our thinking too far into the future.**

MARY TABACCHI: That’s probably something we really need to think about when we have guests at our spa and we are trying to urge them to move forward to quickly. And the sustainability of it, that you think about the sustainability of whatever they are doing, become healthier, probably has to be in short steps? Am I interpreting that correctly?

JESSICA ALQUIST: Yes, that would be my inclination.

MARY TABACCHI: So what would you say when people come to a destination and they come with a goal. What would you advise us in this industry, how to encourage them to do that in a good way because they all want to come to us at the end of the week and say, “I didn’t lose my 22 pounds, you failed.” How would you handle that?

JESSICA ALQUIST: I would do your best to discourage people from setting unreasonable goals. There’s a bookie that bets against those people that go on diets. He lets them set the parameters. So they say, “This is how much I am going to lose and this is how long I am going to lose it, when I’m going to lose it by.” And he bets against them and he wins 80% of the time. It’s probably not good for health, but it really illustrates when people set unreasonable goals and if you, as wellness providers, can guide them towards understanding the limits of their bodies and understanding what will actually be sustainable. What will actually be good for them in the long term? I think that would go a long way. Obviously you can’t convince everyone, but it would make a big difference.

JEREMY MCCARTHY: I think I come at this from a little different perspective because I work in the hotel, spa side of the business, so I have to keep my feet grounded in reality. We don’t have people coming into my spas doing week long programs or trying to transform their health. **When they come into a spa, the way that I think about it is, what’s the smallest thing we can do in a 60-minute window that is going to have the biggest impact on someone.** So that’s why I do think pampering is important, I do think positive emotions are important. What are you giving your customers to think about for the hour they are on the massage table? If you can plant a seed that gets them thinking about either something they are

thankful for, something they are hopeful for, or somebody that they love, and then you have just made that hour of experience something that is going to be much more of a physical relaxing massage experience. **There now having this great moment of appreciation and mental well-being and I think that's what we can really do on the hotel side where we don't have all the programs and options available.**

MARY TABACCHI: I think that's great because we kind of have an answer to how we deal with people at various spas and that's what I think is so important because all of it is so key to people's health, to helping our guest to wanting to come back. Is there a quick question from the audience? We have a couple of minutes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can you talk about the sugar effect on the brain? If you stabilize sugar levels do you keep a better control?

JESSICA ALQUIST: There hasn't been as much research on that as we would like. The paper showing the effect of glucose came out about four years ago, so we move very slowly, because the studies take a long time. I don't know if somebody is working on that. There is some evidence that prisons which adopt healthier diets have fewer incidents and problems with prisoners. I think that is some evidence that speaks to changing peoples' diets might do that.

MARY TABACCHI: One last question? You guys are overwhelming. You're overpowering.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Have you done anything with your staff or unemployment with happiness?

JEREMY MCCARTHY: Yeah. Thank you for the soft ball Jim. I sat next to Deborah Szekely at dinner last night and she told me you have to talk about employee happiness because that is such an important part of the equation. Andrea Foster mentioned earlier things we are doing with Westin Hotels. **One of things we are doing is called an associate engagement program. Of all of the wellness programs that we have for our guests, we're trying to introduce to our employees in some ways as well. If we have super foods on the menu in their restaurant, it's also in the staff cafeteria and we are educating the staff on that.** I needed to make sure I mentioned that so Deborah doesn't get mad at me later.

We are experimenting both on the shallow side of the pool and the deep side of the pool. We're doing a lot with gratitude, we have gratitude journals in the spa where guests can write notes of appreciation or read the messages from other people. In another one of our spa concepts, we have what is called the "glow board" where

people can leave notes of gratitude up on the board. We do a ritual in one of our spa concepts where we ask the guests to choose before the treatment something they're thankful for, something they're hoping for, or somebody that they love, and to focus on that during their treatment.

On the deep side of the pool, we're trying to get guests to focus on the meaning behind the visit. We kind of take it for granted, there's another anniversary or another birthday party, somebody got engaged, somebody is on their honeymoon, but we really want to connect with that meaning with the guests. We've been using notecards, this is actually an idea I got from Anne McCall Wilson at Fairmont, where we use notecards and allow the guests to either present notecards to each other if they're there for a couple's massage or a personalized notecard from the staff to recognize the special event that they're there for, but really making sure that we help them to experience the meaning of their visit.

MARY TABACCHI: Okay how about that. Let's give a big round of applause. Woo hoo!