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Coaching Toward Happiness - December 2005

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A Note From the Editor: Ben Dean, Ph.D.

Dear Coaching Toward Happiness Readers,

Greetings from London! I'm writing from the [2nd Annual Conference on Coaching Psychology](#) sponsored by the British Psychological Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology.

The many distinguished conference speakers include [Alex Linley](#), Sandra Foster, and other experts on positive psychology and coaching. The British Psychological Society has a much more developed interest in coaching than the American Psychological Association. I'm looking forward to attending the sessions and getting to know a new group of interesting coaches.

Coming Next Month: Chris Peterson, Ph.D. Lecture!

We will jumpstart 2006 with a big event: an invited lecture (via phone) and question-and-answer session by [Christopher Peterson, Ph.D.](#) Chris is a major Positive Psychology maven and the world's leading authority on character strengths and values. He authored (with Martin Seligman) *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. He is Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan with an extraordinary bio which I'll recount next time.

This special 80-minute call with Chris will include an overview of the VIA Character Strengths and Virtues Survey. You will be able to download pdf files during the call, and there will be plenty of time for questions at the end. Prior to tuning in, you may want to take the VIA survey yourself if you have not done so. You can find this (free) survey online at www.viastrengths.org.

We will send you a reminder e-mail in January, but mark your calendars now for this special virtual event with Dr. Peterson.

The interview will take place January 20, 2006, from 1:10 PM to 2:30 PM EST (New York time) or 6:10 PM to 7:30 PM GMT.

Self Regulation

Ben Dean, Ph.D.

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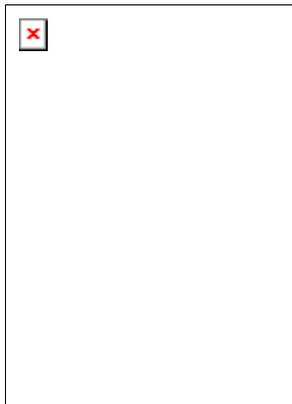
Interview with Robert B. Diener Friday, November 2005

Listen Online
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Listen by Telephone
To listen by telephone, call 212-990-6658 anytime, day or night. Details below.

You can listen to a tape of the interview with Robert by telephone, anytime, day or (24/7) by calling 1-212-990-6658. To fast forward through this in 15 second intervals, *3 (star three). The tape recording begins very slowly welcome callers for three minutes before introducing Robert. about three minutes in, it begins. This is a free call except for long distance charges to New York City.

For instructions on how to listen to the tape playback, [click here](#)



Opportunity may knock only once, but temptation leans on the doorbell.
--anonymous

Self Regulation Defined

When individuals exert control over thoughts, behaviors, or emotions so that they can pursue goals or live up to standards, they are displaying the character strength of self-regulation (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Self-regulation may involve either initiating a response (getting out of bed to go to the gym) or inhibiting a response (resisting the urge to swing by Dairy Queen on the way home from work).

What Determines Success in Self-Regulation?

Most obviously, the strength of the competing desire or impulse influences how successful we are in exerting self-regulation. (Think about the amount of self-regulation required for a seasoned smoker to quit vs. that required for an occasional smoker.)

According to Baumeister (2002), effective self-regulation depends on three major factors:

1) Standards

Standards refer to the goals or ideals that guide the desired response. Are you going to the gym because you want to be healthy? Thin? Energetic? Do you censor an angry comment because you want to be kind? Fair? A good leader?

Sometimes self-regulation failures occur when a person holds two values or goals that are in conflict. For example, coaching clients may not meet their savings goals because their desire to save money conflicts with their desire to surround themselves with beauty or travel the world. Similarly, a client may never finish that novel because the required commitment for writing conflicts with her desire to spend evenings and weekends with her family.

2) Monitoring

Self-control lapses often occur when we are not monitoring our behaviors. In a review of the literature on self-control failures, Baumeister (1994) noted that alcohol intoxication results in lapses in practically any domain that requires controlled behavior. After several drinks, people are less likely to monitor their spending, their comments, their eating, or even further drinking!

Monitoring may also be the key to improving self-control. Polivy and colleagues (1986) did an interesting series of studies in which they first asked dieters and non-dieters to drink two large, calorie-filled milkshakes. Subsequently, they had the (optional) opportunity to eat all the candy they wanted. The dieters ate significantly more than the non-dieters at this time, presumably because their diets were already "blown" for the day and they were no longer monitoring what they ate. However, when the dieters were forced to attend to what they continued to eat (e.g., having to keep their empty wrappers in front of them), they ate significantly less.

Similarly, research suggests that consumers spend less and make fewer "impulse buys" when they record every purchase. Interestingly, Baumeister and others note that few impulses are actually irresistible—even though they may feel that way at the time. Monitoring can effectively dampen the impulse. Even crimes of passion are rarely committed in the presence of an armed police officer!

3) Capacity to Change

Having a well-defined goal (losing weight) and a careful record of one's behavior (no cookies eaten yet today) are useless without the ability to push oneself to take the necessary actions (buying produce, not Pringles, at the grocery store).

Most research supports the notion that self-control is like a muscle. Our capacity to self regulate becomes depleted after use, and it can be developed through training once it rebounds from the initial fatigue. Laboratory studies repeatedly show that individuals show diminished ability to control their behaviors (e.g., resisting cookies, holding back a powerful emotion, or persisting in a difficult task) when they have previously engaged in another task requiring self-regulation.

In related research, Twenge and colleagues (2001) found that making decisions or choices depletes the same finite resource that governs our ability to self regulate. (Imagine a weary holiday shopper who begins a day at the mall with a focused plan but who ends the day making impulse buys and eating a Cinnabon roll in the food court.)

Diurnal cycles also seem to play a role in the ability to self regulate. Dieters rarely spring out of bed and break their diets. Individuals with alcohol dependence who take antabuse typically do so in the morning so that they will not be able to drink (without getting sick) later in the day when cravings intensify. Evidence suggests that our resources for self regulation are restored after a good night's sleep and then gradually depleted during the day as we make decisions and display willpower (or won't power!) in myriad ways.

Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 510) offer the following practical observation and recommendation: "To live a balanced, well-regulated life, it may be necessary to recognize that the capacity for controlling oneself depends on a limited resource that needs to be managed effectively and conserved for the most pressing or important demands. In practice, this entails that much of life must be guided by habit, routine, and other automatic processes, so that the demands for conscious control over oneself are kept down to the level that the self's limited resources can meet."

Practical Recommendations

The ability to self regulate effectively is associated with wide ranging positive outcomes: good school performance, better personal adjustment, better relationships, good leadership abilities, and greater interpersonal appeal. Conversely, poor self-regulation abilities are associated with individual and societal problems ranging from drug and alcohol addiction to crime to unwanted pregnancy.

Interestingly, Seligman and Peterson (2004) did not find any potential drawbacks of too much self-regulatory ability. In those individuals whom we think of as having overly controlling and rigid personalities, it does not appear that a hyperactive self-regulatory mechanism is the culprit.

Below are some practical recommendations inspired by the literature on self-regulation:

- 1) Understand that self-regulation can have a tremendously positive, life-changing impact in your life. And the good news is that self-regulation is like a muscle. You can strengthen it. So take heart!
- 2) Start by evaluating your own self-regulation. Take the VIA and discover where self-regulation falls in the rank order of your strengths. It can't be lower than mine-which was #24 the first time I took the VIA.
- 3) Cut yourself some slack. Self-regulation is a limited resource; so don't tackle everything at once. Start with one area that could use some work and focus on it.
- 4) We do our best when we are rested and our "gas tank" of self-regulation is full. Therefore, early in the day is better than late in the day. If you can, focus on the new self-regulation goal in the morning. For example, if it's exercise, run early in the day--Don't promise yourself you'll do it after work.
- 5) When setting a self-regulatory goal, define your standards and values. What are you working toward? Why is it that you are dragging yourself out of bed every morning to go to the gym? What would it mean to be healthier and

more physically fit? And as you move toward the standard you have set for yourself, explore potential values conflicts. Does spending more time at the gym mean skipping breakfast with your kids before school? Is it worth it?

- ▶ 6) Monitor your behaviors. If you are trying to stop swearing, keep a log of all violations. If you are trying to eat less, keep a food diary and avoid eating while your attention is diverted elsewhere (e.g., to the television or cocktail party conversation).
- ▶ 7) Take care of yourself. Our ability to self regulate is impaired when we are fatigued or stressed, so watch out for evenings when your reservoir is low. Use routines and schedules to minimize unnecessary but stressful decisions and temptations. For example, a dieter might order groceries online or strictly adhere to a list to avoid agonizing moments in the snack aisle.
- ▶ 8) Pace yourself. Remember that even dissimilar activities like resisting a cigarette, making a series of difficult decisions, keeping your cool at work, and persevering on a writing task all deplete the reservoir. Don't make the classic New Year's Resolution mistake and attempt to stop all vices at once.
- ▶ 9) Look for small opportunities to strengthen your self-regulation muscle. If you love pumpkin pie, reduce the risk but test yourself mildly. Eat a full meal at a restaurant so that you're not hungry; then deliberately walk by the dessert counter and look at the pumpkin pie. If you love to read late at night but it keeps you up too late, plan to stop reading one night at exactly the top of the hour, even if you're in the middle of a page.
- ▶ 10) Sleep! Don't start your day with your self-regulatory tank (or your stomach) only half full.
- ▶ 11) Learn more. For further ideas, start with Baumeister's *Losing Control : How and Why People Fail at Self-Regulation* or the chapter on self-regulation in Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.

If you have strengthened your own self-regulation muscle, I would love to hear your story. What was your problem before? What did you do to improve your ability to self-regulate? Please share your good ideas with me so that I can share them with Coaching Toward Happiness readers. Send me an e-mail with SELF REGULATION in all caps in the subject line. I will assume I can use your name if I print your idea in the next newsletter unless you tell me otherwise.

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A Story of Personal Courage

In last month's issue of [Coaching Toward Happiness](#), I invited readers to submit personal stories of courage. What an honor it was to read these tremendous stories. Here, with permission, is a beautiful story written by Debbie Kemp that many of us can relate to as it involves losing a parent. Debbie, thank you for your honesty, courage, and openness:

Thanks for the opportunity to write and think about this Ben. Very inspirational and helpful. Here's my story....

My father died very suddenly about 5 years ago. When I got the news, I started to fall apart. I'd lost my dad and I needed taking care of. Within moments my thoughts shifted more importantly to my mom who had just lost her partner of over 50 years. She needed me and I needed courage! I was so afraid of falling apart and not being the "rock" for Mom. I was so afraid of feeling my grief - I'd never lost a dad before.

To get to Mom's means a 1.5 hr ferry ride. I had time in the line up and time on the ferry to look for the courage I needed to help Mom. An amazing thing happened during that ferry ride. I somehow transcended my own fear and grief and was brought face to face with millions of people around the world who had lost a loved one. The images were of men, women, children in countries I've never even visited before, and in that moment I had courage. I wasn't alone. I wasn't the only person to have ever had to deal with death. I found a peace that enveloped me and held me together over the next week as we made arrangements and comforted our friends and family.

A few weeks ago, I was experimenting with the [Reflected Best Self](#) exercise (University of Michigan). I had my mom and sister participate to share their stories about me at my best. They both wrote about my strength during that difficult time and how they couldn't have pulled through without me. They had never thought of me as strong or courageous - nor had I.

Debbie

Debbie Kemp
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Upcoming Training and Speaking Schedule

MentorCoach®

Dr. Dean founded MentorCoach in 1997. It is an internationally recognized coach training school focused on training helping professionals to develop rewarding coaching practices.

[The Winter MentorCoach Training Programs.](#)

begin (via teleconference) on
December 8, 2005 at 12:00 Noon Eastern**
December 8, 2005 at 8:00 PM Eastern**
January 27, 2006 at 12:00 PM Eastern -.

**Students can easily join this class on January 5th, receiving tapes of the first two hours. For details, [click here](#).

[Blue Sky Visioning Master Class](#)

With Ben Dean and Anne Durand begins January 25, 2006.
12 Wednesdays at 1:00 pm Eastern (NY time) 6:00 pm GMT. How to create a very large vision of what your life could be. Details: [click here](#).

CTH Speaking Schedule

Ben Dean, Ph.D.

Ben will be speaking on "Coaching and the New Science of Happiness" in

Baltimore, MD (2/10/06)

Philadelphia (2/12/06)

Dallas (3/10/06)

Houston (3/12/06)

Psychotherapy Networker Symposium, Washington, DC (3/17/05-3/19/05)



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