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Have We Forgotten Just Who Controls Us?

Do we take full responsibility for our actions? Have we lost touch with whether or not we rely on our government, family, religion, profession, “boss” to control our actions? We should keep in mind that when we talk or think about control of our behavior we infer making a decision. There is a difference between influencing and controlling. Self-Control is an aspect of behavior that is independent of self-image; self-worth; self-value; self-esteem; and self-respect, even though all are frequently used interchangeably, and may influence each other.

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Commentary: Have We Forgotten Just Who Controls Us?

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Do we take full responsibility for our actions? Have we lost touch with whether or not we rely on our government, family, religion, profession, or “boss” to control our actions? We should keep in mind that when we talk or think about control of our behavior, we infer making a decision. There is a difference between influencing and controlling. Self-control is an aspect of behavior that is independent of self-image, self-worth, self-value, self-esteem, and self-respect, even though all are frequently used interchangeably, and may influence each other.

One can argue that self-control has three components: controlling one’s actions prior to an event, controlling one’s actions during an event, and controlling one’s actions after an event. The closer one can get to being consistent with the control of all three, the more successful one may become at exhibiting self-control. Some studies indicate that exercising more self-control increases the chance of becoming more successful. When analyzing the behavior of successful people, we find that generally they have exercised more self-control.

True, there is a very close relationship between these forces (self-control, self-worth, self-value, self-esteem, self-respect), but isn’t it possible that one can have a very high self-image or very strong self-worth, yet not exercise self-control adequately? Is it possible to work to attain a level of self-control that would allow someone to be more productive or successful in academics, sales, or any chosen career? If self-control is accepted as an independent behavioral force, is it possible to train or develop the self-control necessary to help control, or avoid, an addiction

Self-control is a mass of energy cycles revolving around either a thought to do something or a calculation of whether or not to do something. An involuntary action (acting without making a decision) is thrown in from time to time, completing our behavior. It is the “calculating” that we tend to take for granted. A great deal of effort goes into the simplest calculation. At times we may refer to this as the “decision-making” (D-M) process. This D-M process is subject to many predictable influences or exposures, such as family, religion, law, society, politics, economy, friends, education, and, in today’s day and age, would include the media. Throw in all of the “selves” such as image, worth, esteem, respect that we may want to improve, and we can see why engaging in an action is quite complex and takes a great deal of preparation. Having high “self-esteem” doesn’t necessarily mean one will make good diagnostic decisions. For example, a clinician may be so egocentric that he/she cannot be convinced that there is a possibility other than what comes into his/her mind. Thinking highly of yourself may not equate with good decision-making. As a matter of fact, it’s possible it may even distort the decision-making process. An example of this is the clinician who is “close-minded” to change may be so concerned with presenting a particular image that making a “good decision” may be overlooked.

The point is that even considering all of the variables, we either “act reasonably” or we act “poorly”, or we “don’t act” at all. In other words we decide to act (with calculation), or we decide to act with less concern (and thus possible poorer judgment), or we decide not to act at all. We, in essence, exercise some degree of control. We demonstrate some degree of “self-control.” “Not acting” at all is a decision, or not putting enough concern into our action is also a decision, yet both may require just as much “self-control” as we expend when “acting” with careful consideration (a result of a decision).

When one wants to attain a certain level of athletic prowess (whether professional or recreational), doesn’t one engage in some degree of regimented repetition aimed at increasing quickness in specific muscles, increasing strength in specific muscles, or

achieving longer endurance of working specific muscles? Why can't the concept of conditioning a muscle to improve a particular mechanical aspect of its functioning be applied to improving the self-control over a specific behavioral aspect of one's functioning? We can go to school in order to develop a mechanical or technical skill that allows us to achieve a given function, but first we have to learn to "decide" to engage in an action.

Something as simple as engaging in a routine allows us to think before we act. There's an old adage, "count to ten before you act." The question is, are we making efficient use of the time during which we are counting to ten? Are we asking ourselves appropriate questions and making appropriate comparisons of outcomes? After this processing, then we can decide to act (or not to act), and finally we actually act (or not act). If one thinks before acting, even though there are many external influences, one may be better able to exercise self-control.

So the time worn responses of, "he made me do it," or "I was just following orders," or "that's the way it has always been done" may not necessarily be a reasonable explanation for why we act in a particular way, implying we are not in control of ourselves. Of course there are pathologies in which exercising "self-control" is physically or physiologically impossible. For these circumstances, we develop various combinations of medical treatment and rehabilitation protocols. These processes replace the inability to "self-control" or help us to re-establish the ability to "self-control". The point is that we still decided to do it the way "he wanted me to do it," we still decided to "follow orders;" we still decided to do it "the way it has always been done." We controlled our own actions. We exercised self-control.

Is it possible that we can develop appropriate educational programming with which to introduce "regimented repetition" so that youngsters can be better adapted to apply adequate "self-control" when engaging in the D-M process, teaching people early enough how to go about relying on "self" to control their actions? Outside influences are just that – outside influences, but when it boils down to acting, it is the "self" that goes through the D-M process, and then it is the "self" that acts.

Shouldn't we help youngsters to not forget just "who does control us"?