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Lessons learned from trait self-control in well-being: making the case for routines and initiation as important components of trait self-control

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ABSTRACT

It seems common knowledge that trait self-control helps people to achieve the things they find important in their lives by not being distracted by immediate pleasures and temptations. Initial evidence suggests that trait self-control is important in well-being as well, with people high in self-control experiencing more positive momentary affect, life satisfaction, and happiness. Whereas it is not so difficult to imagine why effortful inhibition of impulses would benefit continued striving for long-term personal goals, it is more challenging to understand why self-control would make people happier and more satisfied with their lives. The present paper sets out to explain this intriguing phenomenon and aims to identify mechanisms by which people high in trait self-control experience better well-being. We examine potential underlying processes that may explain the role of trait self-control in well-being and propose initiation of desired behaviour and adaptive routines as key components of self-control in well-being that challenge the classic explanation of self-control as effortful inhibition.


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Self-control is generally defined as the ability to override predominant response tendencies resulting in the inhibition of undesirable behaviours to support the pursuit of long-term goals (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). On a dispositional level, trait self-control involves an ‘active self’ that is able to prioritise long-term over short-term goals, even when these short-term goals are immediately gratifying (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Being able to forego immediate pleasure in service of goals that are more rewarding in the long run is considered crucial in human evolution and essential for human functioning (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Many studies have shown that low trait self-control is indeed implicated in a large range of individual and societal problems, including obesity (Tsukayama, Toomey, Faith, & Duckworth, 2010), academic failure and underachievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), procrastination (Steel, 2007), substance abuse (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), impulsive buying (Vohs & Faber, 2007), and delinquent behaviour (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Importantly, high trait self-control has been shown to be associated with a wide range of positive outcomes. A meta-analysis, surveying over 100 studies, recently confirmed the benefits of high trait self-control in work, school, interpersonal relationships, and health (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Next to better performance in several life domains that relate to the achievement of personal goals, people with high trait self-control also report better well-being, including better psychological

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adjustment (Tangney et al., 2004), and higher levels of happiness (Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, & De Ridder, 2014) and life satisfaction (Hofmann, Luhmann, Fischer, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2013).

The association between self-control and well-being is intriguing, and challenges the common conception of self-control as the ability to inhibit unwanted impulses. Whereas the benefits of refraining from undesired (but oftentimes pleasurable) behaviour are obvious when long-term goals such as work achievement and academic performance are at stake, it is more difficult to imagine how inhibiting immediate urges per se would benefit well-being. For instance, most people would agree that it makes sense that studying for an exam instead of watching one's favourite television show promotes the more distant goal of getting good grades. However, it is not so clear how staying away from the cookie jar would make one more happy in the long run. On the contrary, it seems that many impulsive behaviours that would require resistance to stay on track with one's long-term goals bring immediate pleasure (such as indulging in cookies), making it difficult to understand how controlling these impulses would make one feel happy and cheerful. It has even been argued that people may give up on long-term goals *because* they have the explicit intention to feel good right away (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). Indeed, research on procrastination as the prototypical case of self-regulation failure has demonstrated that people give in to the temptation of postponing goal pursuit as a means of regulating their emotions and experience immediate positive affect (Fee & Tangney, 2000; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013).

We realise that some people may find the association between trait self-control and well-being fairly obvious and not as counterintuitive as we think it is because self-control promotes goal success, which in turn may contribute to life satisfaction and well-being. However, as we will explain in the following, the association between trait self-control and well-being is puzzling when one considers that mere inhibition of immediate urges and impulses may jeopardise positive affect – even when there are benefits in the long run in terms of higher chances of goal success – and that giving in to temptation enhances the experience of immediate positive mood. Importantly, we do not refute the association between trait self-control and well-being. Rather, we argue that this association calls for a thorough examination of the processes that underlie successful self-control. In doing so, we do not contend that 'behaving bad' – not acting in line with one's long-term goals – is the direct source of well-being. We appreciate that people may derive pleasure from acting in agreement with their long-term goals. The main aim of our review is to elucidate that goal success – and thus well-being – does not depend on inhibition only. To better understand in what way high trait self-control would contribute to well-being, we examine an alternative mechanism for effortful inhibition as the key characteristic of self-control. We propose that the initiation of desired behaviour (rather than the inhibition of undesired behaviour) and relying on adaptive routines (rather than effortful resistance to temptations) provide a compelling explanation of why self-control is important for well-being.

In doing so, we will focus on research that highlights trait self-control rather than state self-control which comprises the waxing and waning of self-control across situations and over time (Hoyle & Davidson, 2016). Studies on state self-control have provided valuable insights into when and why the capacity for self-control may drop as the result of previous exertion of self-control, a phenomenon that is known as depletion of resources or ego depletion (Baumeister et al., 1998). Whilst there is debate on the nature and even the very existence of ego depletion (e.g., Carter & McCullough, 2014; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2016; Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012), we will not elaborate on this discussion here. We acknowledge that the resource approach to self-control is a strong theory that has provided self-control research with a new understanding of the crucial role of self-control in adaptive behaviour. At the same time we realise that the way ego depletion is typically assessed – by the so-called dual task paradigm, exposing individuals to an initial task which requires self-control as a manipulation of self-control after which they have to do a secondary task requiring self-control which serves as the dependent variable – may have some limitations precluding a deeper understanding under which conditions depletion may or may not occur (De Ridder, Kroese, Gillebaart, & Adriaanse, 2016). That being said, our line of arguing does not exclusively apply to trait self-control as also fluctuations in the ability and willingness to exert self-control (state self-control) are relevant for understanding the role of self-control in well-being.

By focusing on trait self-control we highlight the dispositional capacity to deal with a dilemma or conflict that presents individuals with a choice between an option that gives an immediate but often-times smaller reward versus an option that brings a larger but delayed reward. Whereas the resolution of this dilemma ultimately contributes to either short-term benefit or long-term reward, the very way in which the dilemma is handled may involve several options, including the inhibition of an undesired behaviour (e.g., not eating fatty foods), the initiation of a desired behaviour (e.g., eating sufficient fruits and vegetables), or a combination of both. In conceptualising self-control this way we align with important theoretical contributions to the self-control literature, arguing that the very experience of a dilemma instigates self-control efforts (e.g., Fujita, 2011; Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012; Myrseth & Fishbach, 2009). Indeed, for the most part the self-control literature explicitly stipulates that inhibition of unwanted responses always takes places in view of a more rewarding long-term goal (rather than inhibition per se; cf. Fujita, 2011; Hommel, 2015). Importantly, dispositional self-control is generally considered as a powerfully adaptive trait contributing to an array of desirable outcomes that should result in a happier, healthier, and more productive life. While many measures for assessing dispositional self-control exist (Duckworth & Kern, 2011), trait self-control is now almost exclusively assessed by the Brief Self-Control Scale (BSCS) developed by Tangney and colleagues (Tangney et al., 2004; cf. De Ridder et al., 2012; Hoyle & Davisson, 2017).

Framing self-control as the capacity for dealing with a dilemma provides the opportunity to either emphasise the classic inhibition component (i.e., the response to the immediate but smaller 'undesired' option) or an *initiating* component (i.e., prioritising the larger but delayed 'desired' outcome). In fact, the widely used BSCS (Tangney et al., 2004) already incorporated an initiatory component, based on the comprehensive review by Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice (1994) that distinguishes four inhibitory components (control thoughts, emotions, impulses, and maladaptive habits) and one initiatory component (regulate performance) of self-control. Recent research on trait self-control (De Ridder, De Boer, Lugtig, Bakker, & Van Hooft, 2011; Ein-Gar & Sagiv, 2014; Hoyle & Davisson, 2016) corroborates the notion that self-control encompasses both inhibition and initiation components with self-control by inhibition involving the conscious overriding of a tendency to engage in goal-inconsistent behaviour while self-control by initiation involves consciously acting in a goal-consistent manner despite initial reluctance. Previous research on state self-control has also provided some evidence that the initiation of a desired response is an important aspect of successful performance, as is for example witnessed by studies using the Stroop task: successful completion of this task not only requires inhibition of a specific response but also to replace this response tendency with another response (Richeson & Shelton, 2003; cf. Englert & Bertrams, 2014). One might argue whether the initiatory part of self-control is a true part of self-control or falls under the broader umbrella of self-regulation (Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2004). In accordance with the definition of self-control as dealing with a dilemma, we posit that the initiatory part of self-control is still self-control because it relates to prioritising a specific option when faced with a self-control dilemma (cf. Fujita, 2011), whereas the concept of self-regulation encompasses more comprehensive strategies related to goal selection, goal setting, goal striving, and goal maintenance (Mann, De Ridder, & Fujita, 2013).

In support of the conceptual distinction between initiatory and inhibitory trait self-control, meta-analytic evidence shows effect sizes equal in size around .21 for the effect of self-control on engaging in desired behaviours and on refraining from undesired ones, suggesting that the initiatory component of self-control (engaging in desired behaviours) constitutes an essential part of successful self-regulation (De Ridder et al., 2012). Indeed, when pursuing a long-term goal such as being slim and healthy, it is often not sufficient to merely refrain from undesired behaviours (e.g., eating unhealthy foods), but it is equally important that the desired behaviour (e.g., eating fruits and vegetables) is enacted because not doing the bad things does not automatically lead to engaging in good behaviour. While it may seem trivial to either frame an act as not engaging in option A (the undesired behaviour) or engaging in option B (the desired behaviour), in many complex (real life) situations both options are not complementary, because options rarely present individuals with dichotomous choices. As alluded to in the example given above, not doing a bad thing is not

equivalent to doing the right thing because not eating fatty foods does not implicate that one consumes sufficient fruits and vegetables. In a similar vein, not yelling at your kids does not by definition imply that one is a loving parent and not withholding the urge to buy a nice gadget on sale does not mean that one's financial situation is under control. The distinction between initiation and inhibition thus constitutes an important aspect of self-control. In the case of well-being, the initiatory component of self-control may prove even more important because striving for positive outcomes has been shown to increase well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986) whereas mere inhibition may be negatively related to well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). We thus propound that in order to understand why self-control would promote well-being, we should consider this initiatory component of self-control in detail. We further propose that initiatory trait self-control is supported by adaptive routines that help to refrain from unwanted impulses without being effortful (or, in terms of state self-control jargon: without consuming resources), which in turn may increase the chance that people engage in strategies for initiating goal pursuit. Before considering these alternative pathways in more detail, we briefly review the role of trait self-control in well-being.

Trait self-control and well-being

From the definition of trait self-control as being able to forego immediate impulses and focus on long-term goals, one might speculate that the lives of people with a high level of self-control may not be much fun: no immediate gratification at all would not make for a happy life. This 'Puritan hypothesis' (Hofmann et al., 2013, p. 266) states that by successfully and frequently exerting self-control, people are denying themselves many (short-term) joys and pleasures, even when they are achieving long-term goals that may in the end be equally or more rewarding. Lending support to this hypothesis, research has shown that individuals with high trait self-control may experience less momentary affect, inhibited expression of spontaneity and extraversion (Zabelina, Robinson, & Anicha, 2007), and limited emotional intensity on a day-to-day basis (Layton & Muraven, 2014). Alternatively, one may argue that instead of making people unhappy, self-control is unrelated to well-being. It may well be that in the long run goal achievement (by impulse inhibition) and well-being are two distinct, unrelated trajectories. This would mean that self-control promotes goal achievement by inhibiting temptations that stand in contrast with long-term goals but not at the cost of immediate positive affect or one's overall appreciation of quality of life. While theoretically speaking this second option would be likely – after all, why would self-discipline make people happy? – there is more support for the third somewhat counterintuitive possibility that self-control and well-being are associated and that people with high self-control experience *better* well-being. Despite the intuitive appeal of the Puritan hypothesis – prioritising long-term goals would lead to a dull, joyless life marked by dutiful self-discipline – there is scarce but consistent empirical evidence for the latter idea that self-control – even at the cost of more pleasurable short-term goals – is associated with a healthy, happy, and successful life. Indeed, people high in self-control lead a more balanced life and have more control over their lives, which is an important requirement for the experience of well-being (Baumeister & Alquist, 2009). Self-control also promotes good functioning in a variety of life domains that are closely related to well-being or are a prerequisite for well-being, such as good work and school performance (De Ridder et al., 2012; Tangney et al., 2004), and thus indirectly contributes to well-being.

Importantly, self-control also more directly affects well-being in a positive way. People with high self-control are healthier (Moffitt et al., 2011) and report healthier lifestyles with less substance abuse, more exercise, and healthier eating patterns (De Ridder et al., 2012). They also report higher levels of psychosocial adjustment and less psychopathology (including depression and anxiety) (Bolin & Baer, 2012; Tangney et al., 2004) as well as better interpersonal relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011). Besides being disciplined, and thereby better able to achieve long-term goals, people with high self-control also report higher levels of life satisfaction (Hofmann et al., 2013) and happiness (Cheung et al., 2014).

Initiating goal pursuit

A few studies shed more light on the underlying mechanism of why self-control is related to well-being. A series of studies by Hofmann et al. (2013) demonstrated that the association between self-control and life satisfaction was partially mediated by momentary positive affect. This finding seems to stand in contrast with previous research suggesting that self-control may have costs in terms of less intense emotional intensity and decreased spontaneity (Layton & Muraven, 2014; Zabelina et al., 2007). However, it may be that, different from what is generally assumed, people with high self-control do not mind resisting temptations that might challenge their long-term goals and even find pleasure in being self-disciplined. Alternatively, it may also be that a high level of self-control is not necessarily associated with resisting short-term temptations (which may decrease positive affect) but is more indicative of leading a life that is not characterised by the experience of many conflicting temptations that need to be dealt with.

For instance, in an experience sampling study in a sample of German adults it was demonstrated that people with high self-control tend to experience fewer and weaker problematic temptations in their environment because they strategically structure their lives to steer away from these vices, and thus do not need to exert effortful inhibition to the same extent as people with low self-control (Hofmann et al., 2012). This suggests that for people with higher self-control life is not just a matter of 'all work and no play' and getting a bigger pay-off in the end, but more positive affect throughout as they go along.

Life satisfaction can be considered a measure of 'cognitive well-being' (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) because it comprises an overall appraisal of one's quality of life. There is also research showing that self-control is related to affective well-being in terms of happiness (Cheung et al., 2014). Cheung and colleagues revealed a moderate to strong association between self-control and happiness and further demonstrated that this relation was partially mediated by the way people pursue their goals, suggesting that individuals with high trait self-control are more oriented toward finding strategies to reach their goals rather than being preoccupied with avoiding opportunities that might prevent goal achievement, which is then related to happiness. These findings lend support to our suggestion that the role of self-control in well-being relates to initiating desired behaviours rather than withstanding immediate gratification and momentary pleasures. Instead of self-control being 'an avoidance-oriented situation' (Muraven, 2008, p. 769), the negative association of self-control with 'prevention focus' and its positive association with 'promotion focus' suggests that self-control is not primarily characterised by vigilance and avoiding losses (prevention focus) as posited by the traditional conceptualisation of self-control but rather involves an eagerness to engage in goal pursuit (promotion focus).

The findings discussed above suggest a pathway of initiatory goal pursuit rather than inhibiting unwanted responses through which self-control can and does lead to greater well-being in terms of life satisfaction and happiness. This view is in accordance with theories that emphasise the role of (intrinsic) motivation to engage in a variety of activities as an important factor in well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In fact, the initiatory component of self-control may reflect motivation to engage in desired activities, as is also posited in research that highlights the role of motivation in successful self-control, including successful state self-control (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012; Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). This view also aligns well with theorising that puts goal pursuit centre stage in well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Emmons, 1986; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Having goals and being able to pursue them in work and academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Harris, Daniels, & Briner, 2003) and in social and intimate relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001) contributes to higher well-being and makes people feel good about their lives (see Klug & Maier, 2015 for a meta-analysis on goal progress and subjective well-being). It thus seems that by being able to work towards the accomplishment of personal goals, people with high self-control experience more well-being. Moreover, the simple fact that people with high self-control more often achieve the goals they pursue may also constitute an important part of experiencing more well-being, since goal achievement has been known to cause positive affect (Carver & Scheier, 1990). This suggestion corresponds well with research on conscientiousness, a

personality factor that bears resemblance with self-control in terms of self-discipline but with less emphasis on impulse inhibition, showing that conscientiousness is linked to adaptive outcomes by engaging in goal-directed activity (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Poropat, 2009). If indeed, as we suggest, people with high self-control are happier because they engage more in goal-directed activities rather than trying to restrain their impulses and withstand the urge for immediate gratification of their needs, the next question is how they manage to do so in a world filled with temptations that conflict with long-term goals on a day-to-day basis. We propose that people high in self-control are more efficient in regulating such self-regulatory conflicts because they have adaptive routines and that they are therefore better able to engage in initiatory goal pursuit.

Self-control routines

Reaching goals contributes to well-being and insofar as self-control facilitates goal achievement, it should increase well-being. Unfortunately, people seldom experience the luxury of being committed to one goal at a time and often entertain multiple goals that can come into conflict. Goal conflicts become even more pronounced when they are not between concurrent goals (two short-term goals or two long-term goals) but between an immediate goal and a long-term goal (De Ridder & De Wit, 2006), which represents the classic self-control dilemma. Whereas it may not be so easy to choose between a chocolate chip cookie and an apple as a morning snack or between pursuing an academic career or a business career, it is far more difficult to weigh an immediately appealing piece of chocolate cake against the distant goal of a slim waist or to decide in favour of preparing a challenging work presentation when there is an opportunity to spend a nice evening with friends. In the previous section, we argued that self-control promotes well-being because people initiate goal pursuit rather than inhibit unwanted responses. An important question is how self-control supports initiating goal pursuit in the face of conflicting (often immediately appealing) goals. We propose that people with high self-control employ different strategies for dealing with conflict than people low in self-control. Specifically, we posit that self-control goes hand in hand with smart goal-striving strategies that do not involve a lot of effort and thus that people with high self-control may save their energy for initiatory attempts at self-regulation.

A longstanding tradition in self-control research has emphasised that self-control involves effortful inhibition of unwanted responses, as can be derived from the definition of self-control in terms of overriding predominant response tendencies to support the pursuit of long-term goals, cited previously. As exemplified by classic resource depletion research, inhibiting unwanted responses requires effort and spending effort on an initial task leads to having less self-control 'energy' for a subsequent task that requires self-control (Baumeister et al., 1998; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). As alluded to in the introduction, there is debate about the exact underlying mechanisms that would lead to self-control resources being exhausted (e.g., Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). Notwithstanding this debate, resource depletion accounts of self-control seem to agree on the notion that exercising self-control requires effortful inhibition, regardless whether self-control energy or motivation and attention (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012) or implicit beliefs about the nature of self-control (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010) are involved. However, if effortful inhibition would be the core ingredient of self-control and if effortful inhibition leads to depletion of resources, as is generally assumed, it is difficult to imagine in what way people would ever be able to engage in goal pursuit if they have previously tried to deal with self-regulatory conflict (which by definition would involve suppression of an unwanted response).

Recent research suggests an alternative route for dealing with ubiquitous goal conflicts that does not rely on the effortful suppression of unwanted impulses in order to achieve long-term goals (Gillebaart & De Ridder, 2015; Gillebaart, Schneider, & De Ridder, 2015). These studies suggest that successful self-control may not necessarily require effort but is more automatic and effortless in nature in such a way that people high in trait self-control employ adaptive routines that do not consume the scarce self-control resource.

A large body of literature exists that demonstrates that installing routines may help people to display desired behaviour without effort. For instance, research on implementation intentions has shown that automatising behaviour by making if–then plans supports people in enacting their intentions that they may otherwise forget in the spur of the moment or when they are distracted by competing activities (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008; Webb & Sheeran, 2003, 2007). Other research has highlighted the importance of automatic processes in self-regulation, such as goal shielding by selective attention (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002) or decreasing the value of temptations that may threaten desired goals (Fischbach, Zhang, & Trope, 2010). However, this literature on automatic processes in self-regulation has as of yet not explicitly addressed the role of automatising attempts at self-control. In contrast, the studies by Gillebaart et al. (2015) and Gillebaart and De Ridder (2015) have revealed that people with high trait self-control have different ways of dealing with self-control dilemmas than people with low self-control in such a way that they are faster in identifying and resolving these dilemmas, which does not seem to drain self-control resources to the extent that effortful self-control would.

While this novel view seems to stand in contrast with classic conceptions of self-control, meta-analytic evidence shows that in fact, trait self-control is more strongly associated to automatic than to deliberate behaviours (De Ridder et al., 2012). It has also been suggested that dispositional self-control may be characterised by the increased ability to make behaviour automatic (Baumeister & Alquist, 2009). People with high trait self-control may thus be able to employ (automatised) strategies that are less dependent on effort and are less prone to depletion. Studies on effortless self-control support this line of reasoning, suggesting that people with high self-control have more adaptive habits (Adriaanse, Kroese, Gillebaart, & De Ridder, 2014; Galla & Duckworth, 2015). Habits are a classic example of automatic behaviour, relying on automaticity rather than deliberation, and thus not relying on the employment of the self-control resource. Importantly, a study by Adriaanse et al. (2014) further showed that these adaptive habits mediated the effect of self-control on health behaviour, suggesting that automatised routines may indeed be an effortless route to self-control success. It may thus well be that people with high trait self-control do not simply work harder than people with low self-control, and that the crucial difference between people with high and people with low self-control does not lie in an innate capability to inhibit impulses, but rather in low maladaptive routines and high adaptive routines that would imply that they can save their scarce self-control energy for attempts at initiating goal pursuit (Mann et al., 2013).

These different strategies of goal pursuit may result from the different ways people with high and low self-control perceive potential self-control conflicts in their environment. For instance, people with high trait self-control tend to experience fewer and weaker problematic temptations in their environment because they strategically structure their lives to steer away from these vices, and thus do not need to downregulate or inhibit undesired impulses (De Ridder et al., 2012; Hofmann et al., 2012). Recent research also suggests that trait self-control affects how people handle the conflict that arises when they are confronted with a self-control dilemma, by demonstrating that higher levels of dispositional self-control were associated with a faster identification and resolution of the response conflict. Moreover, the experienced intensity of the self-control conflict was rated lower on self-reports as a function of dispositional self-control (Gillebaart et al., 2015). Taken together, these results suggest that high self-control is associated with a more efficient regulation of potentially problematic self-control dilemmas rather than mere inhibition of tempting opportunities. With fewer self-control conflicts that are easier to handle, success in goal pursuit is more probable which in turn may lead to more goal-related positive affect (Carver & Scheier, 1990), which has been shown to be an important mediating variable in the association between self-control and well-being (Hofmann et al., 2013).

Conclusion and implications

Successful self-control allows people to achieve their long-term goals in virtually all important areas of life such as academic and work performance, healthy lifestyles, and interpersonal relationships. As such trait self-control is invaluable for human adaptation, as has been amply demonstrated in

previous research. Whereas the classic mechanism through which trait self-control exerts its positive influence on a variety of outcomes has highlighted the role of effortful inhibition, recent studies on the association between self-control and well-being call into question this central component of suppressing unwanted responses. As alluded to in the introduction, the role of trait self-control in well-being, including happiness and satisfaction with life, is not so obvious when effortful inhibition would be the main mechanism involved in self-control success. In an attempt to explain the intriguing association between self-control and well-being we have proposed that self-control is not only a matter of inhibiting unwanted impulses but also of initiating attempts at goal pursuit and that this initiatory component of self-control is responsible for the effect of self-control on well-being. Moreover, we have argued that being able to engage in initiatory goal pursuit is facilitated by effortless self-control strategies. Rather than being busy with suppressing unwanted impulses, which would drain self-control resources leading to self-control failure, high self-control is a matter of adaptive routines and strategically avoiding conflicts, which in turn, leaves more room for initiatory goal pursuit. This novel view of mechanisms involved in self-control bears important implications for our thinking about how self-control operates and how it does affect functioning in important life areas.

First, in our exposition we have highlighted the consequences of trait self-control for well-being in terms of life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect. However, it could be that the association between self-control and well-being is not unidirectional and that a state of well-being also contributes to self-control. Several studies suggest that subjective well-being may serve as a resource that promotes people's capacity for self-control (Aspinwall, 1998; Isen & Reeve, 2005; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). Indeed, it has been noted that positive affect is a sign that one can attend to other business in need of regulation (Carver, 2003) and thus an important prerequisite for self-control. The very finding that psychological states associated with well-being and good functioning may promote self-control, which lends additional support for the idea that successful self-control is not a matter of inhibition per se but rather taking action to achieve desired goals (initiator self-control).

Second, we would like to point out that we have used the role of trait self-control in well-being as a showcase that demonstrates alternative pathways of how self-control operates. We contend that this new understanding of self-control mechanisms bears implications for the operation of self-control in other life areas as well. In fact, the two mechanisms that are central to our reasoning – initiator self-control and adaptive routines related to effortless self-control – are based on research including outcomes beyond well-being, such as health behaviour (Adriaanse et al., 2014), academic achievement (De Ridder et al., 2011), and other positive life outcomes (Galla & Duckworth, 2015). We therefore suggest that lessons learned from trait self-control in well-being can be used to explore the role of initiator self-control and adaptive routines in other behavioural outcomes as well.

As a final note we would like to emphasise that the new understanding of successful self-control in terms of initiator self-control and adaptive routines may have implications for the current academic debate on the mechanisms involved in ego depletion (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). While it is beyond doubt that at times exercising self-control may be effortful and thus deplete resources, our view shows that it does not necessarily have to be that way. Exercising self-control to achieve goals rather than to avoid or suppress actions that interfere with long-term goal striving may even be energising (Cheung et al., 2014) while relying on effortless strategies to handle self-control dilemmas by definition does not draw on resources. That being said, research on successful self-control is mainly derived from studies examining trait self-control. So far, the association between trait self-control and ego depletion is not well understood and has not been a prominent topic of research. Theoretically, it makes sense that people with low trait self-control are more easily depleted because they rely to a lesser extent on initiator self-control or adaptive routines than people with high trait self-control. Whereas people with low self-control may use effort-based strategies that inevitably seem to lead to self-control failure, people with high self-control may have developed strategies that are less prone to depletion by relying on adaptive routines rather than active resistance of temptations. Future research should address the question how trait self-control and depletion are related and specifically examine to what extent adaptive routines protect from depletion effects.

Taken together, we can conclude that trait self-control is associated with well-being: people with higher levels of self-control generally report more happiness, satisfaction with life, and overall well-being. Recent shifts in focus in the area of trait self-control research have provided interesting insights into the *why* of this association. Both initiation of goal-directed behaviour as well as the presence of adaptive routines may lie at the heart of self-control success and subsequent well-being. Of course, this raises a number of new, exciting theoretical and empirical issues that need be explored in more detail. However, the current state of affairs allows for the pleasant take home message that we do not need to rely on our scarce self-control resources to discipline ourselves to happiness.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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