

Willpower is more than saying 'I won't'

By Lily Dayton, Los Angeles Times

Each time health psychologist Kelly McGonigal teaches her Science of Willpower class, she asks students to select a willpower challenge to focus on during the 10-week course. Though students' goals are diverse – kicking nicotine or getting out of debt, controlling their temper or overcoming alcohol abuse – there is one goal that is most common among the 200 or 300 students who pack the lecture hall seeking life change: They want to lose weight.

"It's important to understand that everyone is struggling with something," says McGonigal, whose experience in the Stanford University course inspired her to write "The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It."

Beliefs about the role of willpower in weight loss have changed through the decades. In the mid-20th century, doctors told patients to use their will to eat less. After such restrictive diets failed, the pendulum swung in the other direction as doctors, nutritionists and psychologists recommended that people forget willpower and instead focus on making changes in their behavior that allow them to lose weight.

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