

These Two Words Ruin Diets, Savings, And Long-Term Goals

[Drake Baer](#)



REUTERS/Jason Reed

Two little words destroy many a day's dieting, saving, or hustling: *I deserve*.

As in, I ran two miles, *I deserve* a few scoops of ice cream.

I saved so much on those two books, *I deserve* a third.

I worked all day, *I deserve* to not wash the dishes.

Psychologists call this self-sabotaging behavior *moral licensing*: you give yourself permission to do something "bad" because you've been "good" all day.

The effects are surreptitious.

[Studies have found](#) that moral licensing extends not only from the cookies we treat ourselves to and the snooze buttons we can't stop mashing, but less savory parts of life — like discrimination.

For example, researchers have found that [people are more willing to express prejudiced attitudes](#) when their past behavior has established them as non-prejudiced; affirming a moral identity can [lead people to feel licensed to act immorally](#); and that [people are more likely to cheat and steal](#) after purchasing green products as opposed to conventional products.

Yikes, right?

Gretchen Rubin, the author of "[The Happiness Project](#)," says that moral licensing acts like a loophole, letting us wriggle out of establishing new habits like working out, eating healthy, or getting a side project off the ground.

"Loopholes matter, because when we try to form and keep habits, we often search for loopholes," [she says](#). "We look for justifications that will excuse us from keeping this particular habit in this particular situation. However, if we catch ourselves in the act of loophole-seeking, we can perhaps avoid employing the loophole, and improve our chances of keeping the habit."

Thus the power of knowing what moral licensing is: if you know that you're licensing yourself to act the fool, then you might refrain from doing so.

This requires a reframing.

[Over at 99u](#), Elizabeth Grace Saunders gives a few helpful action points for doing so. We really like two of them.

First, you can realize that shaping your habits is a matter of commitment:

Remember that choosing certain actions is about commitment to your underlying goals, not about being "good" or "bad." In the case of the healthier eating and more exercise, you need to see both actions as independent steps

that are necessary to achieve your weight loss goal. They are not different sides of a scale but steps on a journey.

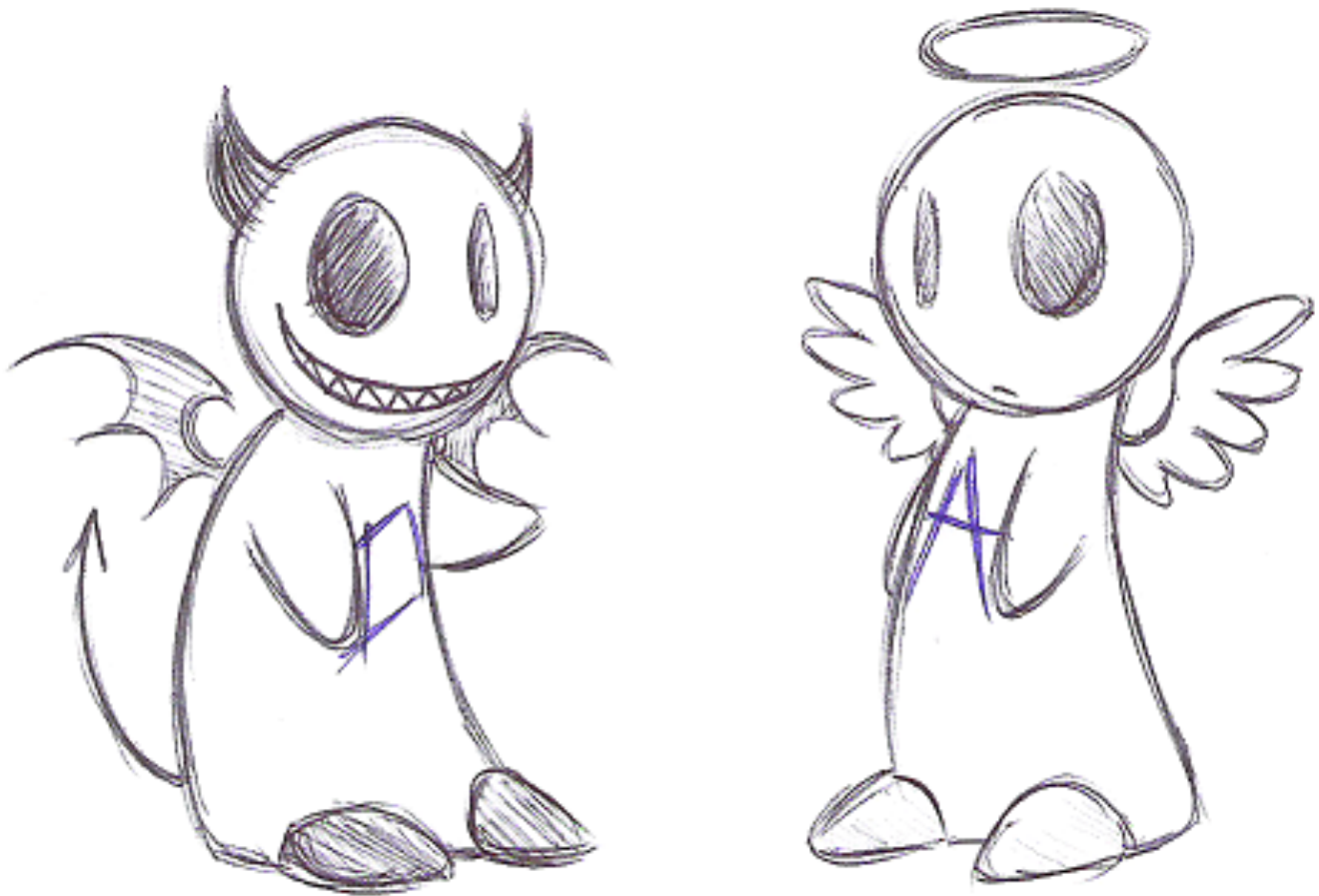
Second, you can make your actions part of your identity:

Decide you are the type of person who *wants* to do the actions aligned with your goals. If you go around thinking you're a bad, lazy, and self-indulgent person who just occasionally can muster up the gumption to fake good actions, consistent change will be an angry struggle and you'll constantly look for ways to be subversive or to "get away with" something. Make your goal part of your identity, even if it feels uncomfortable.

There's even a fancy name for identity-shifting patterns: they're called [keystone habits. And they'll change your life.](#)

Moral Licensing: How Being Good Can Make You Bad

Posted on [August 18, 2013](#) by [Agota Bialobzeskyte](#) | CATEGORIES: [self improvement](#)



We are quick to beat ourselves up for our apparent lack of willpower. However, the reason why we struggle so much with self-control is often not some innate weakness of our characters, but our lack of understanding of how our minds work. There are many willpower traps that we can avoid simply by being aware of certain mental glitches that we all share. One of such glitches is moral licensing, a fascinating phenomenon, understanding of which can make overcoming various willpower challenges much easier.

What is moral licensing?

Moral licensing is a particularly interesting mental glitch: apparently, doing something that helps to strengthen our positive self-image also makes us less worried about the consequences of immoral behaviour, and therefore more likely to make immoral choices. For example, studies have shown that people who have just expressed strong disagreement with sexist statements are more likely to then hire a man for a job in a male-dominated industry, because they feel secure about their “non-sexist” self-image and therefore pay less attention to the possible biases they might have (the exact same thing happens with people who express disagreement with racist statements and then are more likely to unconsciously discriminate against racial minorities). It seems that being “good” is where the slippery slope towards being “bad” starts.

Why is moral licensing a willpower threat?

You might be wondering what on Earth does moral licensing have to do with willpower. Well, a lot, because this sneaky mental glitch often derails your progress towards achieving your goals without you even realizing what hit you, which gives you the impression that you lack willpower. How many times have you said to yourself “I will start eating healthy from Monday..”.. And then ate an extra large McDonald’s meal all by yourself which you flushed down with a litre or two of Coke (I’m totally making this up, people, never happened to me!), since you thought that it’s okay to go crazy considering that you will start eating healthy from Monday? We all know that “Monday” never comes, though. That’s just one of the many ways in which moral licensing can ruin our efforts to change despite our best intentions. Let’s take a closer look at what it is and what to do about it.

How moral licensing derails our progress

Moral licensing can be hard to understand sometimes. In its essence, it’s about using something “good” to justify “something “bad”, often without even realizing it. However, that doesn’t say much, does it? Here are some of the most common ways moral licensing manifests in our daily lives..

“Good” vs. “Bad” : how being “good” gives you a permission to be “bad”

How it works: Any act and any thought that you consider to be “good” can license a subsequent “bad” behaviour because we feel that we deserve a reward for being so righteous. For example, one study have found that merely considering donating to a charity increased participants’ desire to go on a shopping spree. The problem here lies not in rewarding yourself, but in the fact that our rewards often tend to be the things that stifle our progress towards our goals, or even set us back (say, if you reward exercising with delicious meals, it’s likely that you will gain weight as a result).

Real life examples: Rewarding yourself with junk food, alcohol, expensive items, and so on when those rewards sabotage your efforts to achieve your goals (for example, if you have no intention of eating healthy or losing weight, then it doesn’t matter how much junk you eat, but if you want to shed some pounds, then rewarding yourself with junk food isn’t the best idea..).

What to do about it: Stop seeing every willpower challenge as a test of your character. Sure, we sometimes encounter genuine moral dilemmas, but these are few and far in between. Most of our willpower struggles have nothing to do with vice and virtue, since eating a cheeseburger or surfing the Internet is not exactly a moral downfall. It’s best to stop putting “good” and “bad” labels on every single thing that you do, and start focusing on whether your actions will get you closer to achieving your goals or not, because this way it’s easier to avoid the trap of giving yourself rewards that sabotage your efforts.

Progress : how making progress gives you a permission to take it easy

How it works: Making progress towards our goals often makes us less motivated to work towards achieving them: for example, studies have found that students who feel good about the amount of time they have spent studying are more likely to drop the books and go out with their friends. Our brains are hard-wired to look for shortcuts (it’s a way of preserving energy),

and therefore when you rejoice in the fact that you have made a significant progress towards your goals, your brain happily takes it as a sign that work is done, time to chill out. It then tunes up the “volume” of cravings it has been suppressing all this time in order for you to stay on track. This makes it very hard not to go off the rails.

Real life examples: Celebrating losing weight by gorging on junk food, rewarding yourself for the progress you have made in your business by reducing work hours, and so on..

What to do about it: Stop focusing on the progress you’ve made towards your goal and start focusing on your commitment to achieving it. When you consciously choose to see your progress as a proof of your commitment (“Wow, I’ve done so much, this must be really important to me!”), you prevent your brain from saying “Okay, work is done, time to party!”, which makes it much easier to stay motivated until the very end. Keep in mind that ultimately, the results are all that matters, therefore it’s better to not get enamoured with your progress before you achieve your goals.

Halo effect: how “good” things makes us lose sight of the big picture

How it works: In this context, halo effect is a phenomenon when in our minds one thing casts a “halo” on another thing, which leads us to believe that the latter has the qualities of the former. For example, studies have shown that people who order diet soda in McDonald’s are likely to consume more calories overall than those who order regular soda. That’s because in their mind, the low calorie nature of diet soda casts a low calorie “halo” on the rest of their meal, which is why they give themselves a permission to order a Big Mac instead of salad. The halo that our “good” actions cast makes us completely delusional about the real impact of our choices. Halo effect doesn’t make any sense whatsoever, but this is how our minds work, and we often fall into this trap without even noticing it.

Real life examples: spending more money while shopping with coupons than you would have spent shopping without coupons (savings halo), consuming more calories when you have ordered salads with your lunch than you would have consumed if you haven't ordered salads with your lunch (low calorie halo), and so on..

What to do about it: Pick the most concrete measure possible and use it to decide whether an action is compatible with your goals or not. For example, if you are trying to lose weight, you can pay attention to calories, which will allow you not to fall into the diet Coke trap when you visit McDonald's (whether it's smart to go to places like McDonald's when you are trying to lose weight is an entirely different question..). We don't have any reliable mental accountant in our heads, therefore if you want to avoid errors caused by halo effect it's best to make decisions based on data, not on your intuition.

"I'll start on Monday!" – how believing we will behave "well" tomorrow makes us behave "bad" today

How it works: We humans have a persistent tendency to expect that we will make different decisions in the future. How many times have you told yourself that you are going to start or stop doing something from Monday? We feel justified in doing something "bad" today because we think that our "good" actions tomorrow will more than make up for it.. However, as you probably already know from your own experience, that magical "tomorrow", "Monday", or "next week" when everything is supposed to change never comes. This delusional optimism is the reason why years can fly by without us making any significant progress towards our goals.

Real life examples: Procrastinating on starting a diet, going to the gym, saving money, and so on, because you believe that you will do that someday in the future, and therefore putting it off today doesn't make much difference.

What to do about it: A good strategy to deal with this is to focus on reducing the variability in the behaviour that you want to change rather than

eliminating the behaviour itself: for example, studies have found that people who focus on smoking the same number of cigarettes every day are more successful in ultimately reducing their smoking than those who focus on quitting smoking altogether. You can apply this in your life: say, if you want to stop wasting time on the Facebook, you can try to focus on spending no more than one hour a day on social media, as opposed to trying to quit cold-turkey. This will prevent you from saying “I will quit Facebook on Monday” to yourself while spending 4 hours a day on it, waiting for that magical Monday that never comes. Another useful trick is substitute the question “Do I want to do this today?” (say, skip the gym) with a question “Do I want the consequences of doing this everyday?” (being out of shape), since that changes your perspective, and helps you stay focused on your long term goals.

You can see that the main mistake that leads to moral licensing is evaluating things in terms of good and bad rather than asking whether they help us to get closer to our goals or set us back. We like to think that we are motivated by our sense of ethics to a large extent, but we aren't, since most of us simply want to feel good enough about ourselves rather than become a saint, and once that threshold is met we don't care much about ethics. What really motivates us is getting what we want and avoiding what we don't want. That's why we are much more likely to say no to that pizza when we think about it as a threat to our waistline, not as a moral dilemma. Stop thinking in terms of good and bad, start thinking in terms of getting closer or getting further from achieving your goals, and it will be much easier to stay on track.

Yes, it sounds absolutely ridiculous, but you do it too!

I know, I know.. When you read about moral licensing, it seems so absurd, that your first reaction is “I don't do that!”. However, the reality is that although pretty much everyone believes that they aren't affected by mental glitches like this, all of us are vulnerable to them, and fall into these traps much more often than we think. It's silly and naive to assume that you are somehow exempt from having the same cognitive limitations that all other

humans are subject to (I'm sorry if it sounds harsh, but I call it as I see it..). That's why I invite you to take a moment to think about how moral licensing affects your daily decisions: what is the most common trap you fall into and what can you do to avoid it? Let me know in the comments!

Agota Bialobzeskyte is the author of "How to have more willpower". What could you achieve if you had the willpower to do what you have to do? Well, good news: you can have all the willpower you need! [Here's how to have more willpower.](#)