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Why impulsive behaviour may be good for your health

By ***Monika Lisjak and Angela Y. Lee***

Just as we can give in to our oh-so guilty impulses in moments of weakness, new research shows that under the right circumstances these impulses can in fact lead us to engage in behaviour that is actually more conducive to our health.

Extended periods of self-control are often immediately followed by an increased tendency toward acts of impulse. This is not only well documented but also intuitive. Resisting the temptation to buy a chocolate cake, making product choices, and keeping track of the amount spent to stay within budget are all activities we engage in when grocery shopping and which require self-control.

After we engage in these activities we often feel worn out, and are more likely to behave impulsively afterwards. Indeed, you may have noticed that by the time we reach the checkout at a supermarket, we are more susceptible to impulse purchases, as retail product placement experts – and confectionary manufacturers – are well aware.

But there is an interesting flipside to this tendency. Under the right conditions, a shopper standing at the checkout may be just as likely to impulsively buy health-supporting vitamin supplements as they are to reach for a sweet treat. It is this self-preserving impulse that prompts people to make healthy decisions that we explored in our paper, The bright side of impulse: depletion heightens self-protective behaviour in the face of danger.

We usually think of impulsive behaviour as something maladaptive that will lead to greater personal risk. However, impulsive and reckless are different things, despite often being used interchangeably. Our study indicates that the human tendency to give in to impulse following a period of self-control can actually lead to healthier decisions that reduce personal risk.

Overriding impulses

When a person forces themselves to override impulse, they become depleted. Ordering a salad when impulse suggests that chocolate cake is the superior choice; choosing a fuel-efficient car when impulse decrees that the pretty red sports car is the most desirable; staying up late into the night finishing an essay when the impulse is to abandon the project and go to sleep.

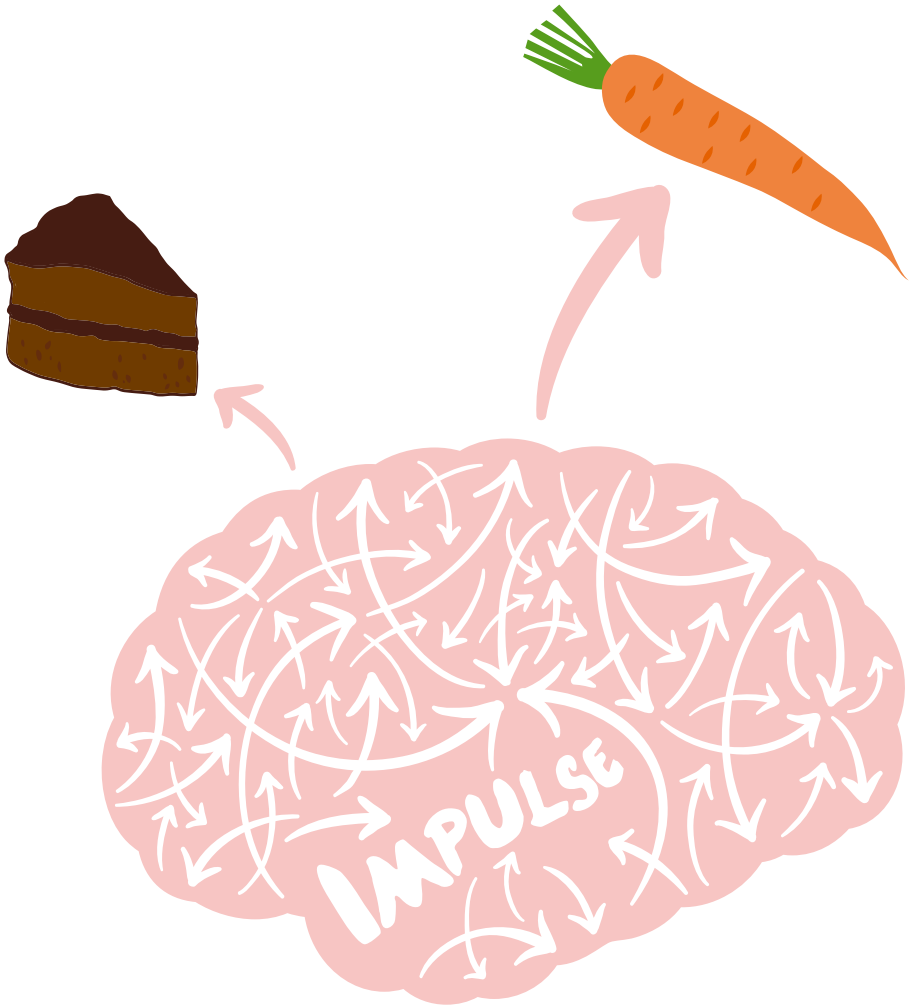
These situations may seem very different at first glance but each requires people to override their impulses, putting them into a state of depletion. A depleted individual feels more vulnerable than a non-depleted person when danger is perceived in the environment.

Depletion happens relatively quickly, and it then becomes important to replenish our limited reserves. Replenishment occurs when we rest, eat, or have a little fun. We become re-energised and more carefree. The crucial period between depletion and replenishment is when impulsive behaviour is most likely to be displayed. However, this impulsive behaviour is not always of the kind we immediately think of – over-eating, drinking, or spending excessively. Instead, impulsive behaviour can also be aimed at preserving physical safety and health, and more broadly protect us against danger.

Indeed, we show that when depleted people are faced with health risk, their self-protective impulse kicks in, which makes them behave in more healthful ways. The implication is that being depleted (and therefore impulsive) may ironically help us make decisions that are more in line with our health goals when risk looms.

In one of our experiments, we recruited respondents from the general population and asked them to read a health message describing the dangers of a medical condition (kidney disease) and advocating the virtues of early detection of that disease. The objective of the message was to persuade the recipients to get tested for kidney problems. The message also highlighted the risk associated with having a family history of the condition.

The study showed that amongst participants with a family history of the disease, those who were depleted reported feeling more vulnerable and expressed greater intentions to get tested relative to those who were not



"Our study indicates that the human tendency to give in to impulse following a period of self-control can actually lead to healthier decisions that reduce personal risk".

depleted. However, among participants with no family history for that disease, depleted and non-depleted participants did not differ in their low perceptions of vulnerability and intention to get tested.

In another experiment, depleted individuals were more likely to opt for a laptop that incorporated significant safety-related features during product assessment than their non-depleted counterparts.

It is important to note that we studied perceived physical risk, rather than an emotionally stressful situation like the fear of losing one's job. This means that speculation on how depletion relates to emotional risk and interpersonal relationships is just that – speculation. However, our study supports some interesting existing literature that suggests depletion (and replenishment) may play a strong role in workplace decision-making.

One such example in the existing literature concerns the decisions made by judges as to whether or not a prisoner will be released. Early in the morning, when the judge was fresh, more prisoners were deemed worthy of release. Just before lunch when the judge was depleted, fewer prisoners were released as the judge's impulsive behaviour veered toward preserving public safety.

After the lunch break (and the replenishment that comes with food and rest), release numbers rebounded. Clearly this is not a conscious decision but rather is one borne out of an impulsive desire to create a physically safe environment. This observation is

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supported by our own research and may have far-ranging implications for any profession that deals with large sums of money or high-impact human scenarios like justice and possibly medicine.

Marketers take note

Based on our research, marketers of pharmaceutical products may be well served by understanding the peak times for depletion. We offered gym-goers a choice of sunblock or moisturiser as a small gift in exchange for participating in our survey. Depleted participants who had just finished their workout were more likely to choose the safety-related product (sunblock) than non-depleted participants who had yet to begin their workout. Our conclusions support the actions of our hypothetical shopper who is just as likely to reach for vitamins as chocolate.

Marketers of safety- and health-related products and services may choose to air their advertisements at a time of day when a consumer is most likely to have just arrived home from work or school, depleted, but before they have replenished their reserves with rest, food and fun.

Where to from here?

The basic principle of a depleted person being prone to self-preserving impulsive behaviour when risk is perceived opens up a number of interesting questions: what differences in this type of behaviour might be observed among differing age groups, genders and cultural backgrounds? Is it possible that the impulse to protect oneself would apply not only to situations involving physical risk but also social/emotional risk?

Should those working in the fields of law, medicine, aviation, and high finance encourage their staff (and themselves) to maintain an awareness of the correct balance between depletion and replenishment in order to ensure consistent decision-making? Should investors interested in high-risk, high-return stock market plays ask their brokers to handle their account only in the morning, before depletion occurs? If depletion leads to safer, more conservative decisions, what is the optimum balance?

It would be unreasonable for us to offer answers to these questions based on a single investigation. We can however invite the reader to draw their own conclusions, and to look forward to a time when research might be able to address some of these questions. ■

"Our conclusions support the actions of our hypothetical shopper who is just as likely to reach for vitamins as chocolate".

This article is based on the paper *The bright side of impulse: depletion heightens self-protective behaviour in the face of danger,* written by Monika Lisjak and Angela Y. Lee and published in the *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol 41 – Issue 1, p.55-70. http://doi.org/10.1086/674975

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