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How to Boss Yourself Around

By **Melissa Dahl**

SHE'S THE BOSS

(http://nymag.com/tags/shes-the-boss/)

Everyone, every day has a thing — or, more likely, many things — that they know they *should* do, but really would rather not do. At least, not right this minute, thank you. The funny part is that this often applies about equally to tedious tasks and the things that some piece of you truly does want to accomplish in the long run: Doing the five-mile training run that will help build the endurance you need to finish a marathon; finishing some task at work that will pave the way to a promotion; putting the damn phone down and going to bed at a decent hour so you're not a zombie in the morning.

It's a strange phenomenon, when you think about it — this idea that *I* am trying to coax *me* into doing this thing that will, ultimately, benefit the "both" of us. It's like there are two of you in there: a taskmaster with an eye toward the future and a petulant toddler who is much more concerned with the immediate pleasures of the present. How do you get *you* to obey … well … *you*?

This is a question researchers who study human behavior have studied at length, usually using terms like *self-mastery*, *self-control*, or good old-fashioned *willpower*. And one reason, some psychologists **argue** (https://books.google.com/books?id=e7dbYJJ7c8kC&pg=PA89&lpg=PA89&dq=self+control+and+two+selves&source=bl&ots=bqFcqGt2CB&sig=_HtL22BFDwIK4jEBWI6_XZu0KVg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEEQ6AEwBWoVChMI34ix15vsxgIHA7j#v=onepage&q=self%20control%20and%20two%20selves&f=false) , that bossing yourself around can be so surprisingly tricky to do is that, in a way, there really is more than one "you." It's called the multiple selves model — the concept that your future-goal-oriented self is almost constantly tasked with corralling the rest of you(s) into place. "The two selves fight for control over decision making," write the behavioral economists John Malcolm-Dowling and Yap Chin-Fang in their 2007 scholarly **tome** (https://books.google.com/books?id=e7dbYJJ7c8kC&pg=PA89&lpg=PA89&dq=self+control+and+two+selves&source=bl&ots=bqFcqGt2CB&sig=_HtL22BFDwIK4jEBWI6_XZu0KVg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEEQ6AEwBWoVChMI34ix15vsxgIHA7j#v=onepage&q=self%20control%20and%20two%20selves&f=false) , *Modern Developments in Behavioral Economics*. "Individuals are sophisticated enough to have the self-awareness to understand their actions will fall between the range of the myopic self and farsighted self. However, they may be powerless to take farsighted decisions when tempted by shortsighted alternatives." Anyone who's ever hit the snooze button (so, everyone) has experienced this self-sabotage in action.

It's an interesting concept in the abstract, to be sure, but there's some evidence to suggest that your brain takes this two-selves idea quite literally. Neuroimaging **research** (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2656877/) led by the UCLA psychologist Hal Hershfield **has found** (http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/01/time-to-get-acquainted-with-future-you.html) that your brain seems to consider your future self to be almost unknowable — a stranger, essentially. In his lab, Hershfield first asked his study volunteers to think about celebrities — like Matt Damon or Natalie Portman — while they were inside an fMRI machine, something scientists use to measure brain activity by tracking blood flow. Then Hershfield asked the participants to imagine themselves, but ten years in the future.

As it turned out, the activity recorded in the subjects' brains when imagining their future selves and the celebrities looked eerily similar, Hershfield and his colleagues reported in 2008 in the journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. It's little wonder, then, that getting yourself to behave *now* can be so difficult — it's like you're acting for the benefit of some person you're vaguely familiar with, but you've never actually met. Why finish cleaning the apartment when you've just discovered *Jane the Virgin* on Hulu? Those dirty dishes sound like a problem for future you.

Hershfield's work has largely focused on the negative effects of this quirk of human psychology. He's found, for example, that if you don't consider your future self to be truly *you*, you're less likely to, say, save adequately for retirement. But some psychologists argue the opposite – that you can use this tendency to work in your favor when it comes to self-control. In a paper published late last year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, University of Michigan psychologist Ethan Kross found — across seven experiments involving nearly 600 participants — that when people talked to themselves in the third person (as in, literally addressing themselves by their own names), they were able to better control their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, subsequently performing better on everyday nerve-racking tasks, such as public speaking in front of strangers.

An unlikely real-life example of this comes from LeBron James, who used this trick to boss himself into taking the leap from Cleveland to the bigger market in Miami a few years back. "One thing I didn't want to do was make an emotional decision," James **told** (http://espn.go.com/chicago/nba/columns/story?id=5365985) ESPN reporter Jon Greenberg. "I wanted to do what's best for LeBron James and to do what makes LeBron James happy." Rather than a self-centered verbal tic, Kross and his co-authors use the James example to bolster their argument that "using one's own name … to refer to the self during introspection is a form of self-distancing that enhances self-regulation." Perhaps this is a way of crystallizing that "two-selves" idea, which allows you to use it to get that *other* you to listen for a change.

That said, there are certain contexts when you're most likely to listen to you, according to psychologists like Roy F. Baumeister, the Florida State University psychologist who has written **extensively** (https://psy.fsu.edu/faculty/baumeister.dp.html) about self-control. In 1998, Baumeister published a famous **paper**

(http://faculty.washington.edu/jdb/345/345%20Articles/Baumeister%20et%20al.%20%281998%29.pdf) suggesting that self-control is a finite resource — you can use up your supply of it, in other words. In one experiment, people had a choice between eating chocolate and a more virtuous choice like radishes; then, they were asked to solve a tough puzzle. Those who'd managed to coerce themselves into eating the veggies were more likely to quit earlier on the puzzle than those who'd let themselves have the junk food. You've seen this in your own life: If you make yourself go to the gym in the morning, it seems perfectly reasonable to order a heavier-than-usual lunch. After you let your inner boss have its say, it seems to become easier to ignore its admonitions for a little while. Because of this, some psychologists have **argued** (http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/95.abstract) that self-control comes easiest first thing in the morning — as the day slips on and your willpower gets used up, it becomes harder to keep yourself in line. The behavioral economist Dan Ariely, for example, urges that you're better off getting the hardest stuff **done in the first two hours of the day** (http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/05/time-to-fix-your-disorganized-calendar.html) if you want to get them done at all.

And sometimes, if your lazier self is dead set on declaring *You're not the boss of me!* to your goody-two-shoes self, it might be time to revoke some privileges. Psychologists like Brian Wansink at Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab have found that your environment dictates much of your behavior, suggesting that it's often best to remove temptation from the picture. For example, simply seeing a delicious food can make it more likely that you will consume more of it than you might've intended to. In one of Wansink's often-cited **studies**, he placed 30 Hershey Kisses on secretaries' desks; about half were in clear jars, and the rest were in opaque containers. The secretaries given the see-through jars ate the candy 46 percent faster than those who had the opaque containers.

Personally, I often find that this Wansink-inspired method of outsmarting myself is a solid last-ditch maneuver. When I'm stuck on something at work, I'll often find myself wandering over to Facebook. As I scroll mindlessly through the endless stream of babies and #brands, I vaguely know this is not helping me finish the piece I was writing. It's not even something I enjoy, really. And so a few weeks back, I set up my Chrome so that Facebook now redirects to *New York*'s homepage. It's slightly unsettling these days when I go to close my tabs and see how many are open to nymag.com. (Already this morning I've apparently tried to go to Facebook three times.)

But it can also be as simple as making a backup plan. They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and there's a good reason for the cliché — the NYU professor Peter Gollwitzer **estimates** (http://www.psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/99Goll_ImpInt.pdf) that intentions account for just 20 to 30 percent of variance in a person's actual behavior, suggesting that even if you truly want to listen to your better self, it doesn't always happen. So Gollwitzer suggests the strategy of ***implementation intentions*** *(http://www.psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/99Goll_ImpInt.pdf)* — in plainer English, you could call this if-then statements: *If* I get a 3 p.m. candy craving, *then* I will go for a walk outside instead. Incidentally, a good friend of mine is tackling his own social-media addiction using this tactic: *If* he gets the urge to waste time on Facebook or Twitter, *then* he instead reaches for the pen and scratch paper he keeps at his desk and sketches out a few new scenes for the comic book he's working on.

But perhaps my favorite piece of advice on getting yourself to just ***do it*** *(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuHfVn_cfHU)* comes from Oliver Burkeman, a writer for *The Guardian* and the author of ***The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking.*** *(http://www.amazon.com/Antidote-Happiness-People-Positive-Thinking-ebook/dp/B0080K3G4O/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)* In his book, Burkeman argues that part of the problem is that people believe they need to foster some motivation before tackling a task. "Who says you need to wait until you 'feel like' doing something in order to start doing it?" Burkeman writes. "The problem, from this perspective, isn't that you don't feel motivated; it's that you imagine you need to feel motivated." After all, when your boss asks you to complete a memo by the end of the day, I'm sure she couldn't care less whether you *felt* like writing it. Expect the same from yourself.

To do this, Burkeman suggests adopting a mindfulness approach to the question of motivation: Acknowledge and observe the fact that you really don't feel like working right now. And then open up a new document and get started, regardless. "If you can regard your thoughts and emotions about whatever you're procrastinating on as passing weather, you'll realise that your reluctance about working isn't something that needs to be eradicated or transformed into positivity," Burkeman writes. "You can coexist with it. You can note the procrastinatory feelings and work anyway." Sometimes, bossing yourself around involves a teensy bit of micromanaging.

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