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TRAINING SELF-CONTROL? A META-ANALYSIS

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Self-control is related to many important outcomes throughout a lifetime such as a lower likelihood of divorce, a longer life, and better academic and occupational outcomes. Many studies have found that self-control can be depleted similarly to a muscle. This phenomenon was deemed ego-depletion and prompted studies on how to strengthen this muscle. Recently however, a large-scale registered replication and meta-analysis found no evidence that self-control is depleted like a muscle. As a result, this finding calls into question whether self-control stamina, or capacity, can be successfully trained. The current study is a bias corrected, random-effects meta-analysis of 20 tests on training self-control capacity. Similar to the meta-analysis on cross-sectional studies of self-control depletion, bias tests were conducted using tests of funnel plot asymmetry, p-curve analyses, tests of insufficient variance, and R-Indexes. The analysis produced a significant overall effect of training on self-control capacity such that doing daily activities like improving posture, regulating speech, or avoiding sweets over a period of one week to four months resulted in higher levels self-control on subsequent self-control related tasks. Thus, participants were less depleted after performing a single self-control related task after engaging in training than they were before engaging in training. Moreover, there was little to no evidence of bias in the literature. However, several inconsistencies in the use of covariates suggest the existence of some bias. Overall, the study suggests that training can increase capacity for self-control. However, more well powered and stringent studies on training self-control are required to truly understand this effect.