



you're hungry and lacking in glucose, the willpower "muscle" runs out of energy. Pep it up with a little sugary snack, and the willpower kicks back into action. Not that useful if the willpower you were looking for was needed to avoid that sugary snack - the dieter's catch 22. Women suffer doubly from this, as during menstruation energy rushes to our reproductive systems and we become low on glucose elsewhere.

It's not all bad news though - McGonigal is also quick to point out that overall women have a natural advantage as we are a little better than men at the willpower game: "Men are good at a clear goal that they can turn into a competition. [With a diet] they will say, 'I will hit a certain number on the scales.' But they are not necessarily good at keeping the weight off. They are good at putting their blinkers on and going after a prize, but when that thrill wears off you need something else to sustain you." So what is the key to success if new year's resolutions are doomed but you still want to change facets of your life in 2012? All the experts are agreed that it's not a good idea to make a long list of rules that start as you're fighting the New Year's Eve hangover on 1 January. As Baumeister has discovered, willpower is finite - so pick your battles wisely.

McGonigal adds, "I usually ask people what they think is reasonable and cut it in half. So if people say they will exercise an hour a day, I suggest they do 30 minutes. People think the choice is between doing nothing and doing everything. The real choice is between doing nothing and doing whatever you feel you are willing or able to do."

Also, re-focus on changing your mindset about change itself - instead of feeling daunted, feel inspired by the possibility. Thinking about the things you want to transform, however incrementally, is a way of imagining your ideal self, which is a positive thing. "It allows us to remember what we actually care about," says McGonigal. "There is a sense of potential that you could be that person who gets up early to exercise, avoids junk food at all costs or saves up for a deposit for a house. But we can remember what we care about and identify with the best version of ourselves, that is that person who can do it. Most people identify with the worst version of themselves and they think that is what they really are. When people set goals it's a great way to make them feel better instantly."

So don't berate yourself if, like me, you're already tucking into a Crunchie at the end of this feature. Your only 2012 resolution should be to give your willpower some attention.

## WOMEN WITH WILLPOWER

*And you thought giving up cupcakes was hard...*

### HUNGER STRIKE HEROINE

In 2010, demonstrating self-restraint of mammoth proportions, the executive director of the Fort McMurray Family Crisis Centre in California went through a three-week hunger strike to raise awareness about the need for a new women's shelter in her community. Mary-Ellen Proctor completed a 21-day fast - the number of days that women can stay at the shelter before they have to be reassessed.

### KAYAKING QUEEN

Daredevil *Blue Peter* presenter Helen Skelton set records when she became the first person to kayak the entire length of the Amazon alone in 2010. She travelled 2,010 miles (3,230km) on a solo journey from Nauta in Peru on 20 January, to Almeirim, Brazil on 28 February, achieving two world records.

### CYCLING CHAMPION

In April 2012, Juliana Buhning, director of US child protection charity Safe Passage Foundation, plans to become the first woman to circumnavigate the globe by bicycle in 140 days. The current route passes through 17 countries: Italy, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, India, Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Spain and France.

### DIVING BELLE

Having the willpower not to breathe is a big ask, but in 2002 British free diver Tanya Streeter, now 38, dived to 525ft (160m) on just one gulp of air. She could have slipped into unconsciousness at that depth but she surfaced with a new world record instead.

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But however many reps you give your willpower biceps, there is one serious enemy to self-control that's hard to fight - that's distraction. In one study, students trying to remember a phone number were 50% less likely to choose fruit over chocolate when offered the choice. "When your mind is preoccupied, your impulses - not your goals - will guide your choices." In other words, if you're serious about achieving even small goals, concentration is key.

### RESIST TEMPTATION

There are other practical ways to moderate your behaviour too, when you feel like you're about to cave in to temptation. "Slow your breathing down to four to six breaths per minute. That's 10 to 15 seconds per breath. Slowing the breath down activates the prefrontal cortex and increases heart rate variability, which helps shift the brain and body from a state of stress to self-control mode," says McGonigal. You also need to avoid willpower's sworn enemies: sleep deprivation, stress and low blood sugar. One of