



COLLOQUIA TREVERENSIA

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Heavy with Willpower: Self-Control Disrupts Appetite Regulation Among Chronic Ruminators



Sander L. Koole received his Master's degree at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, and his Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He is Professor at the Department of Clinical Psychology of the VU University Amsterdam and Director of the Amsterdam Emotion Regulation Lab.

His research focuses on the broad question how people self-regulate their thoughts, feelings, and actions, and his research uses both experimental and individual-difference methods. He received a Consolidator Grant from the European Research Council in 2011, which is awarded to researchers with the proven potential to become leaders in their field. He supervises students at undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral levels.

Abstract:

According to popular beliefs, overweight people are lacking in self-control. However, my colleagues and I believe that overweight may sometimes result from too much self-control. People with compulsive tendencies, such as chronic ruminators, may have difficulties in disengaging from high self-control. The resulting tension may disrupt appetite regulation, and eventually lead to weight gains. Three studies tested these ideas.

In the first two studies, we primed self-control by asking participants to engage in thought suppression (Study 1) or to plan an aversive activity (Study 2). In control groups, participants engaged in free expression (Study 1) or planned a fun activity (Study 2). We then measured appetite regulation, defined as the correspondence between food deprivation and preference for high-calorie foods. The results showed that priming high (versus low) self-control disrupted appetite regulation among ruminators, but not among non-ruminators. Moreover, chronic use of thought suppression was associated with higher body mass index among ruminators, but not among non-ruminators (Study 3).

It thus appears that self-control may interfere with healthy appetite regulation among chronic ruminators, which may promote overweight. Interventions should be cautious in emphasizing self-control, especially among people with compulsive tendencies.

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