



Controlling the urge

Does the ability to control one urge extend over the ability to control other urges? For example, the urge to control a full bladder? New research by INSEAD visiting professor of marketing Mirjam Tuk proves it can – and not only that: the decisions you make when under the “urge to purge” are actually better than those made under “normal” circumstances.



Tuk received an “Ig Nobel”

Award in Medicine for her research with Debra Trampe of the University of Groningen and Luk Warlop of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and Norwegian School of Management, at this year’s ceremony on September 29 at Harvard. The Ig Nobel Awards, an American parody of the prestigious Nobel Prizes, have been around since 1991 and recognise annually research and studies that on the surface seem humorous and perhaps trivial, but contain the essence of real discovery. Organised by a magazine of scientific humour called Annals of Improbable Research, the Ig Nobel Awards are often presented to the winners by Nobel Laureates and the organisers’ stated aim is honouring achievements that “first make people laugh, and then make them think”.

Tuk and her fellow authors conducted four studies which suggest that our unconscious efforts at self-control (in this case over the urge to urinate) are not only directed at the main task, but can affect other controls in a positive way, and with enormous potential. For example, the second study required two sets of participants to make a simple financial decision – receive a small amount of money now or a larger amount later. The set of participants with full bladders were less inclined to opt for the impulsive choice to take the money now. Their self-control was higher, along with their bladder levels.

The final study determined that external cues – a soft waterfall, dripping tap, or young child whining for a toilet, for example - could produce greater sensations of bladder control, which in turn could influence participants’ overall self-control. “It suggests a waterfall feature in your neighbourhood mall can make the shoppers more controlled,” Tuk says, with a warning that cunning mall managers may also install more toilets.

Controlling other urges

She says although the research – entitled “Inhibitory Spillover: Increased Urination Urgency Facilitates Impulse Control in Unrelated Domains” - may be

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open to clever marketing ploys, it is more about positives than negatives. “Hunger, for example, has been found to make people more impulsive and focused on the now, for reward,” she says. “From a baseline, this research can only make you less impulsive.”

Tuk believes her work and subsequent research may eventually lead to answers for controlling serious impulsive human conditions like eating disorders, alcohol or drug abuse and gambling addiction. “It’s an honour for academics to receive this award,” she says. “It’s a recognition that our work is getting a lot of attention in the press and the outside world, and that’s something valued by academics. It’s also a recognition of originality and creativity.”

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