



Restraint Over Wanting

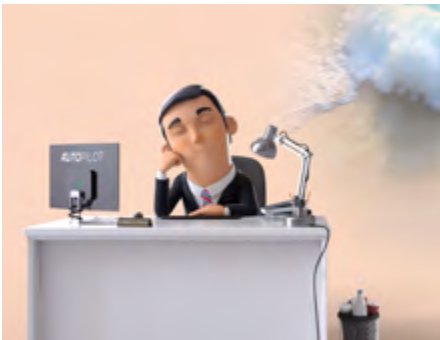
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WEIGHT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM BEHAVIORAL TREATMENT MODULE



Did you know permission thoughts exist for a reason? For our ancestors, when a calorie opportunity was subconsciously recognized (WANTING), thoughts immediate followed as to how and why they should GO AND GET. These thoughts did nothing less than ensure survival in a calorie-unreliable world. It makes sense these thoughts would be persuasive. It also makes sense that these thoughts would be automatic. They are learned from past successful food-finding missions.



Restraint Skill Development

This section describes how to develop, as best as you can, the capacity to restrain against **WANTING**. Restraint means changing your thinking and then your behaviour in moments of **WANTING**. This section is about the processes of human decision making. **WANTING**, when it is reflexively triggered, gets shuttled up to what is called the executive system, front of our brain, the conscious part of our brain and the part of the brain where decisions get made.

To understand this part of the brain, think of it as being composed of two parts. To best understand this, when you have time, please reference this [video](#), featuring Daniel Kahneman. One part is called the autopilot, or system one, and is a fast and automatic system of thinking and decision making that focuses on immediate gratification. The second is the potential hero of this story and is called the sleepy executive, or system two, which is a slow, deliberate system of thinking that is able, when considering choices, to weigh consequences and consider the future. To further understand the sleepy executive, or system two, there is one more key point: this part that thinks slowly and about the future, is usually fast asleep and not involved in most decisions. Most decisions get made by the first system, the autopilot, the fast thinking system, especially decisions around food. These automatic thoughts are also called ‘cognitive bias.’

This module discusses the skill of waking and using the sleepy executive to your advantage in moments of **WANTING**. These are the key decision moments regarding eating and drinking (and activity) that [determine](#) one’s best weight. This skill of restraint goes by many names in the literature, depending on whether you are reading neuroscience or psychology, but we will use the term ‘cognitive restraint,’ described by [Rena Wing](#), the grandmother of behavioural weight management, as the “central behavioural attribute of those that sustainably lose weight.”

Simply said, when it comes to restraint skills, not everyone is on [an even playing field](#). Cognitive-executive restraint is considered a [variable trait](#) and is highly heritable. Fortunately, [effective behavioural strategies](#) exist, along a spectrum, to improve restraint skills. Restraint skill development involves changing thinking. Cognitive-behavioural therapy and acceptance-based therapy play a large part in restraint skill development. The skill of cognitive restraint can be learned and improved over time and with repetition, much like a muscle working against resistance builds in strength and gets bigger. In fact, MRI studies have shown changes in this part of the brain in as early as 12 weeks in those who successfully practice restraint!

In this section, you will be invited to **discover, challenge** and **ultimately change** autopilot thoughts, also called ‘permission thoughts.’ Permission thoughts speak in a moment of **WANTING** about why one **SHOULD** eat or eat more. These thoughts sound like justifications or rationalizations as to why you **SHOULD** eat or eat more. New thinking in moments of **WANTING** can be learned and practiced and this new ‘restraint thinking’ represents the foundation of sustained behavioural change. In best weight terms, this is the skill that generates adherence to a long-term-overall-lower calorie intake.

Now we live in an environment where calories are limitless, yet permission thoughts are a built-in part of food decisions that drive us in the opposite direction of our best weight. Permission thinking is another example of a system that conferred advantage in a former environment that now confers disadvantage in this one.

So **WANTING** and permission thinking are automatic. We don't control them and they come from, in one case, a subconscious part and in the other case an automatic part of our appetite system. They come from underneath as we navigate this food-filled environment.

Three-Step Process for Restraint

Restraint is built using cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). The actual tool of CBT is called cognitive restructuring; literally changing one's thinking.

1

The first step in the cognitive restructuring process is **capturing** your automatic permission thoughts.

2

The second step is **challenging** those thoughts with evidence.

3

The third step is **creating new restraint thoughts** based on your evidence.

With practice, these new restraint thoughts may become the new response to **WANTING** displacing permission thoughts. Let's explore these steps in more detail.



STEP 1: Capturing Permission Thoughts

Capturing permission thoughts sounds easy enough, but in fact, permission thoughts as discussed earlier are automatic and fleeting, and often go unnoticed.

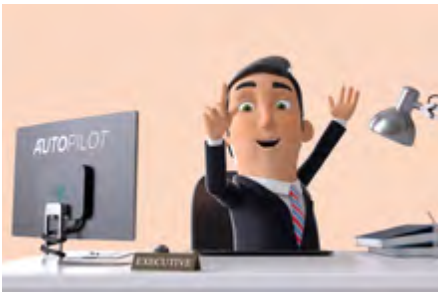
Permission thoughts have unique characteristics.

- 1 They immediately follow **WANTING**
- 2 They are automatic, not controllable.
- 3 They may sound persuasive and convincing in the moment, but by nature they are irrational and untrue, in fact often the direct opposite of the truth.



WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE?

Imagine you have been accused of a crime and you're standing in court. The prosecution lawyer stands up and gives the jury three convincing arguments as to why you should be convicted. The jurors nod their heads in agreement with each of the prosecutor's points. You're worried. The prosecution rests. If the case ended here you would most likely be convicted. But what about the defense lawyer? Imagine next that a highly skilled defense lawyer stands up and expertly refutes and discredits the prosecution's three arguments. Case closed; you go free.



STEP 2: Challenging Permission Thinking

Once you have captured your permission thoughts, ask, "where's the evidence?" What is the evidence, if any, that supports your thinking, and what evidence does not support your thinking?

To challenge permission thoughts you need to bring forward evidence that refutes and discredits your permission thinking to 'sway your jury' back in your favour. The evidence is called restraint thinking, but for our purposes it is also called 'values-based thinking.' Do I value this? Is this important to me? How will I feel afterwards?

CREDIT CARD

I can have this now, and later... I'll eat less.

I have said this before and not eaten less later, and anyway this is about this moment and building this skill in this moment.

DESERVED / EARNED

I've had such a hard day, I deserve this...

If it comes down to what I deserve, I deserve to feel in the direction of what's important to me. This is not important to me and in fact this would leave me feeling regretful and unhappy and I don't deserve that.

GATEWAY

I'll just go and see what there is. I'll just have a small amount of this...

If I go and see I will be more likely to have something, and if I have something I will be likely to have more.

RESIGNATION

I'm not losing weight anyway so I may as well...

Struggling with weight is a real condition. I have support, I have access to treatment, this is a long-term project and every moment of restraint counts.

ON TRACK

I've been doing so well lately I deserve...

If this is important to me I can have it, but not for this reason. Rewarding 'doing well' with a setback does not make sense.

OFF TRACK

I've been doing so poorly lately, so I may as well...

Struggling with weight is a real condition. I have support, I have access to treatment, this is a long-term project and every moment of restraint counts.

You may notice a pattern in the examples.

Three questions are suggested to be at the root of restraint thinking.

“

Is this aligned with my values?

How will I feel afterwards?

Is this building my restraint skills or impairing them?

~~~~~  
You may notice that permission thoughts focus on the immediate and discount the future. You may also notice that restraint thoughts do the opposite.

#### SOCIAL-CULTURAL NORMS

It would be rude in this circumstance to not eat this...

*I value food and fun, drinks, socialization and celebration. Is this valued because if not, I should figure out how to advocate for myself and continue in the direction of what is important to me.*

#### THE REBEL

No one can tell me what I can and can't do. I can do what I want and so...

*I should do what I want... but do I want this? Is this important to me, because if it isn't, I may feel regretful and unhappy afterwards and that I don't want.*

#### BALANCING CALORIES

I have room for this in my calorie target so...

*My key skill is restraint in the moment of WANTING; effort against resistance builds my restraint skills like exercise builds muscle. Landing at the right calorie level in a day is a secondary consideration. If I am hungry or if I really value this then fine, but otherwise just because I have 'room' does not mean I should eat it.*

#### THE STRAW MAN ARGUMENT

I'm not eating donuts and ice cream (suggesting that you are making a relatively healthy choice) and so this is fine...

*My effort should be in the direction of restraint skill development, so if this is not for hunger and is not important to me, I can pass.*

#### UTILITARIAN

This will help me. This will help me feel less stressed / tired / upset / sad and so...

*After eating this, will I feel less stressed / tired / upset / sad? I know I will feel relief from WANTING, but only for a moment and nothing else will change. In fact, I may feel more stressed / tired / upset / sad after eating it.*

#### NOVEL

I have not had this for a long time so...

*If this is important to me I should have it, but the length of time since I last had it will not play into my decision.*

#### HEDONIST

This is great, I just love this...

*Is this important to me now and how will I feel afterwards? My efforts should be in the direction of restraint skill development and finding my best weight.*





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