

# How to Take Advantage of the Economy of Behavior Control



The Economy of Behavior Control is leveraged through investing your willpower.

That phrase may sound like some buzzword BS to you, but the idea behind it is powerful.

For years I tried to will my way into the life I wanted: setting specific goals, relying purely on desire and motivation, pump-up music, quotes. Anything. And then... I ended up right back where I started.

Because nothing stuck. Nothing got easier. I tried to do everything and ended up doing nothing. My goals remained out of reach and just thinking about them began to drain me.

And then, I figured out my problem.

The answer lies in our behavioral system. Specifically, the relationship between our unconscious and conscious behaviors: our habits and our willpower.

In what remains, I'll go over the Economy of Behavior Control and the basics of how to literally invest your willpower.

(Or just skip to the Conclusion. We all do it.)

## What is our main resource in the Economy of Behavior Control?

Our main resource is NOT time. Instead, it's willpower.

Mental effort is the resource we use to behave intentionally. It takes the form of glucose in our bloodstream, which our brains use for higher cognition. Think, prefrontal cortex.

### Some examples of using willpower:

Exerting willpower: exercising self-control, consciously making a decision, paying attention, contemplating deeply, overriding an impulse, exercising working memory, experiencing stress, and so on.

In my research I've become familiar with the name Roy F. Baumeister, PhD, who's most known for his work on willpower. He is one of the authors of the book [Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength](#). If you've heard of "ego-depletion", Baumeister's the guy behind it. He and his colleagues were among the first to prove that [Willpower is More Than Just a Metaphor](#).

Here's some good news: if you've ever made a conscious decision that favored your future self over your present self, then you've invested your willpower. But, here's the bad news: most of us tend to spend our willpower as opposed to invest it. Because nobody has told us how to actually invest it... until now 😎.

Some of us are "natural investors", meaning we use willpower in a very effective way. If you are, count your lucky stars.

Not me.

I really had to understand the system and how the Economy of Behavior Control works in order to become an investor. Even still, merely understanding how it works is not the end of the story.

But because I'm a learned investor I can now share the logic behind it with you.

At the core of the Economy of Behavior Control are habits.

## What are habits?

Habits are repeated behaviors that become hardwired into our neural circuitry, becoming the path of least resistance and our default behavior.

Habits can be thought of as automatic and unconscious behaviors we exhibit when we're "on autopilot". They get triggered and we perform them automatically.

Habits are self-reinforcing and don't require willpower to be performed and to be maintained—or require very little if they do ([Willpower](#), Roy F. Baumeister & John Tierney).

They are the behaviors of the automatic or unconscious self.

Here's the in-depth article on [Habits](#) if you're interested.

## Mental Effort is the new Time

A common notion is "how you spend your time is how you live your life". And that's true, but there's a deeper truth: How we invest our willpower determines how we spend our time.

All behaviors happen within Time, but intentional behavior can only happen from ME. So the quality of our time is a combination of our deliberate and non-deliberate behaviors, our willpower and our habits.

Ever tried planning out a perfectly productive day? By the hour? Or half-hour? It's not too hard to plan right? The planning doesn't limit us. Our ability to execute does.

We know what we should do, but we don't do.

And even if we're able to spend time doing what we set out to, it could be low quality time: we could spend a lot of time reading without necessarily learning, a lot of the time at the gym without getting healthier, in someone's company without strengthening our relationship.

No matter how we spin it, if we want to maximize the quality of our time we need to invest our ME. That's why I've stopped planning my day in terms of time and instead moved to planning in terms of willpower. If you want to see [my mistakes](#) of time-planning for 17 weeks, by all means.

Time is not the limiting factor for a difficult behavior, your willpower is.

## Finding direction and creating (meaningful) motion

Without direction, there's no way to adjust your path effectively. Shots in the dark. So we need to figure out our desired destination and our starting point in order to create direction.

### Introspection leads to understanding

Similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, I've developed a Value Hierarchy, though with a key difference: YOU create it.

We all have different needs and desires and we all value them differently. On top of that, our values shift depending on where we're at in life. So we need a system that can shift with our values as they change, which is why I've gone in depth about how to [Create Your Value Hierarchy](#).

The result is a simple list of your pursuits in order of importance. Once you've created it, you'll have gained an understanding of your ideal self and prioritized your Values accordingly. And understanding is the precursor to deliberate action and eventual embodiment.

If we wish to become our ideal self all we have to do is behave the way we intend to. But, we all know that isn't easy.

There's such a big disconnect between our intentions and our behaviors that the scientific community has "developed" a term for it: The Intention-Behavior Gap. [Article to come on this: the [18+] strongest contributors to the Intention-Behavior Gap and the corresponding ways to combat them.]

It's only after we deepen our understanding of how we operate that we can begin to operate more effectively and act deliberately.

## Deliberate action leads to embodiment

Why do we need to be deliberate in our action if we wish to realize our ideal self?

Because the current brute-force approach to self-improvement doesn't work. Many arrows, but no target.

If we could "just do" what we wanted to reliably, there would be no such thing as the intention-behavior gap. We'd already be as good as our intentions. But, we are our behaviors. Not our intentions. Which is why we need to close that gap.

In the advice of Anders Ericsson, champion of the term "deliberate practice", we need to "seek constant, critical feedback" in order to improve ([Peak](#)). In a similar vein, one of Peter Diamandis' Laws states, "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it".

"Deliberate practice involves feedback and modification of efforts in response to that feedback" ([Peak](#), Anders Ericsson). So, we can only reliably repeat behaviors IF we understand why and how we did them, noting reasons for shortcomings and successes, making adjustments, and refining the process along the way.

## The Economy of Behavior Control and the financial analogy

(No need to dust off the calculator, this is strictly conceptual.)

### Active income

This is what most of us are familiar with. Active income is simple and linear: we get paid a specific amount for the amount we work. You work more, you earn more at the same ratio. An example of active income is when an extra on a show gets paid a fixed amount for the time worked. For active income, no matter how much you've worked before, you always have to work more to get paid more.

## Passive income

Passive income is how people make the big bucks. A simple example of passive income is an actor's royalties: she spends all this time and effort in the beginning, practicing her craft, working on many different shows with a bunch of different directors and cast members, and so on and so forth.

Once she becomes part of a successful show though, she gets paid royalties every time the show runs. Meaning, she gets paid without having to do any more work, making her income effectively exponential because it continues to increase without further investment. Because of the nature of habits, investing your effort into habit-creation is like investing in passive income.

## Let's go over an example.

There are two people in a show called Seinfeld, one of those people is Jerry Seinfeld and the other is an extra. Jerry gets paid every time the show airs (passive income) and the extra only gets paid an hourly rate for the time he or she worked (active income).

## The relation to habits

It's not a one-and-done type of situation, but the idea behind it is that once we invest enough willpower, and the habit is created, the investment period is over. And all that's left to do is reap the rewards.

Namely, once the habit is gained, we don't have to "try" to do it anymore. It will occur automatically because we will have made it the neural path of least resistance.

In the same way that Jerry Seinfeld invested his time and effort and was rewarded with royalties, when we invest our willpower into our unconscious behavior, we will be rewarded with good habits. Let's call this passive progress.

This point cannot be lost: all we have to do is deliberately invest our willpower in the beginning, until the tipping point is reached and the habit is gained.

Here's another way to look at it: once we've gained the habit to exercise at 1pm every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, it will take willpower to not exercise at those times.

You may have heard that around 40 percent of our behavior is automatic. That was according to a diary study done in 2006 from researchers at Duke University ([Habits—A Repeat Performance](#), David T. Neal, Wendy Wood, and Jeffrey M. Quinn, 2006). Some other estimates claim up to 95 percent based on the amount of information processed ([Subliminal](#), Leonard Mlodinow).

To me, the actual percentage doesn't really matter, just the fact that some of our behavior is automatic and effortless, which has been shown time and time again.

## The momentum of habits

What makes our habits the best place to invest our willpower is their momentum because it allows them to continue with little-to-no maintenance and strengthen with repetition. Behaviors become easier and easier as we repeat them.

Every time we perform a behavior we make it more likely that we will act the same way in the future. In a similar way to Newton's First Law of Motion, our habits will stay in place unless we RE-place them. That's why they're so efficient. It's easier said than done, but technically speaking, all we have to do is get the ball rolling.

Once a habit is gained, it will remain. Aaand one more time for the fluency purposes:

### Once a habit is gained, it will remain.

Our habits can either be like an income we are forever receiving or like a loan we are forever paying.

## Pushing the button

If all you needed to do was push a button to determine the quality of some of your behaviors, knowing that they would require almost no willpower to perform or maintain, how well would you choose to behave?

Here's the thing: we can "push that button". But "pushing the button" requires willpower. It requires an awareness of our behavior and an understanding of how it works, deliberate action in the form of willpower investment.

As Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman says, "[...] little can be achieved without considerable investment of effort" ([Thinking, Fast and Slow](#)). And, if we couple this with Anders Ericsson's "deliberate practice", where we can measure the effectiveness of our effort at least in some way, we are going to be in much better shape.

My goal with Hack That Habit is to help you push that button.

## Conclusion

Our behavioral system is an economy we can take advantage of, better put: we can take advantage of the Economy of Behavior Control. Our most valuable resource within this economy is willpower (ME).

We use willpower to "buy" consciousness and perform higher cognitive tasks. Mental effort is more than a couple buzzwords.

Our habits, or unconscious behaviors, don't require ME. So we can take advantage by investing in our habits instead of continually spending.

Investing your willpower in habits is like passive income: it's exponential. Not investing in habits is like active income: it's linear.

Aligning your unconscious behaviors with your conscious goals is the best investment of willpower you can make.