

DUNCAN RYAN was only 42 and weighed 508 pounds. At five feet eleven inches, he was considered morbidly obese. At that weight it doesn't matter how tall one is, more fat than anything else is being carried around. Duncan is not alone. One out of three Americans is in a similar boat. On a cruise ship with his wife, Duncan "could barely wedge himself into his cabin. He spent most of the trip at the buffet. 'I was literally touching both sides of the shower,' he says. 'It was out of control.'"¹

Is there something in your life that feels out of control? Perhaps you are dangerously overweight. Maybe certain behaviors need to be reined in. You know what needs to be done, but it's not happening.

In the 1950s, researchers attached an electrode to a specific part of a rat's

brain. They were investigating whether rats might be made uncomfortable by electrical stimulation of that area. Instead they found that the rats kept going back for more. When given a lever in which they could stimulate this area of the brain themselves, they would press it as much as 700 times per hour. All day and night the rats would push the lever, refusing food and sleep.

Years later they put electrodes on the same part of human brains.

Soon the humans were acting much like the rats, doing whatever it took to stimulate that part of the brain and foregoing necessities like food to experience it. The participants said they liked it, but it didn't result in happiness. Instead they felt frustrated, anxious, and couldn't get the desired satisfaction. The researchers concluded that they were experiencing what the brain interpreted as a promise of happiness, a promise of reward.

The brain thinks

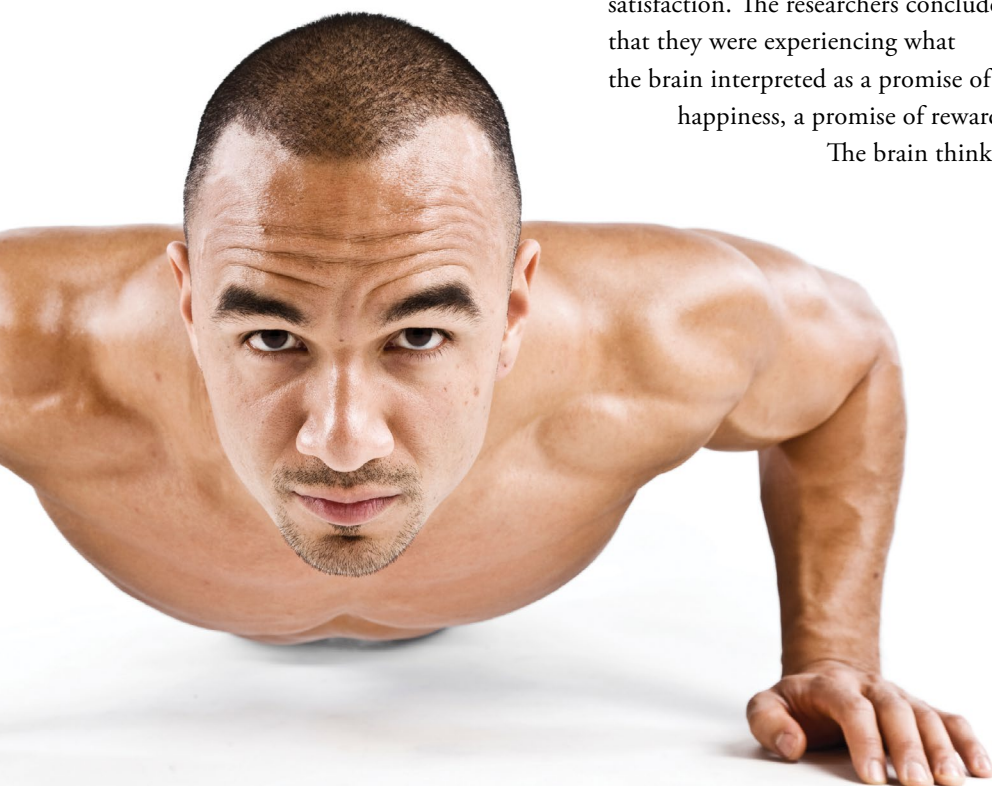
something good is about to happen. The anticipation becomes so strong that the individual continues dead-end behavior.

There can be a very large gulf between wanting or anticipating happiness and the actual experience of it. Often we find a chasm between

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wanting to achieve a goal, such as losing weight, and actually doing it. So many physiological and psychological variables exist in what may feel like an abyss. The effects of life's disappointment, sin, and pain reside there, but so do willpower and self-control; essential ingredients to happiness as well as success.

The part of the rat and human brain that, when activated, keeps us going back for more is where out-of-control begins for many. Often it takes something pretty loud to help us realize that the lever we are repeatedly pushing isn't really working for us. For Ryan, it took sleep apnea that woke him up every 20 minutes, constant exhaustion, chest pains, and then a hospital stay for double pneumonia during which nurses could not find a strong enough bed to hold him. When goals seem impossible, where do you start? Doctors said if Ryan could lose 150 pounds he could have a gastric bypass surgery as an aid in further weight loss. "His wife had other



ideas. She said, ‘If you can lose 150 pounds, you can lose the rest.’”²

Like a muscle, willpower can and will become stronger with use, with “the exercise of the will.”³ Waiting until it is easy, or you feel like it, or when it is no longer painful, uncomfortable, or unsavory, is not exercising the will. It is exercised as choices are made and

however, he was able to walk four minutes on the treadmill. Eventually he was running.

Ryan chose to give up his twice-a-day-McDonalds habit and bags of candy. He didn’t base this decision on how he felt about McDonalds. He based it on something that became more important to him than McDonalds. Willpower is

that he looks as good as he feels.”⁸

It’s not easy to let go of stimulation lever tapping. It has raised our hopes, but in the end it hasn’t delivered. If you desire to be free of such behavior, take courage. “You cannot control your impulses, your emotions, as you may desire; but you can control the will, and you can make an entire change in your life.”⁹ When the power of the will is united with divine strength “nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37). God will equip you to be in control.

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executed against inclination. It focuses on the goal and not on the immediate inconvenience or challenge.

Like a muscle the will needs rejuvenation. Certain lifestyle habits have been found to recharge, while others such as sleep deprivation and poor nutrition zap the willpower battery. Stanford health psychologist Kelly McGonigal, PhD, has examined the latest research on willpower and says, “Nutrition comes into play because it also influences how available energy is for the brain. Something as simple as eating a more plant-based, less-processed diet makes energy more available to the brain and can improve every aspect of willpower . . .”⁴

McGonigal also highlights how important a role model or supporter is. Who you hang out with makes a difference. Others’ good or bad habits influence us. Find someone whose willpower and encouragement is infectious, someone who shares your goals. For Ryan, this was his wife. She willed for him to lose the weight without the surgery. He ran with it. Well, at first it was barely a two-minute walk. The second day at the gym,

exercised when body and brain work together. No matter how fervent the desire, it won’t cut it alone. “Desires for goodness . . . are right, as far as they go; but if we stop here, they avail nothing.”⁵ The will “is *the spring* of all your *actions* . . . It is the governing power in the nature of man, bringing all the other faculties under its sway. The will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power which works in the children of men unto obedience to God or unto disobedience.”⁶ Often the excuse is given that willpower is weak. Perhaps, but “it is too frequently the case that the will is exercised in a wrong direction.”⁷ Rather than looking at willpower as what makes us do what we don’t want to do, take it as a heaven-ordained tool or weapon and achieve what we really want.

Ryan got down to 188 pounds. “But he still wasn’t happy with his results. ‘I didn’t think I looked good,’ he says. ‘I was gaunt and soft.’” Then he started weight training. “‘Everything finally clicked for me,’ he says. The former fat man adjusted his diet to support his new workouts and began packing on 30 pounds of pure muscle. Today, at 215 pounds, he takes great pride in the fact

¹ Brandon Guameri, “Success Story; Duncan Ryan,” *Men’s Fitness*, <http://www.mensfitness.com/training/success-stories/success-story-duncan-ryan>.

² Ibid.

³ Ellen G. White, *Mind Character & Personality*, p. 686.

⁴ Lia Steakly, “The Science of Willpower,” *Scope*, 12/29/11, <http://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2011/12/29/a-conversation-about-the-science-of-willpower/#sthash.glteTs73.dpuf>.

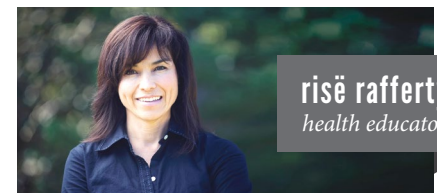
⁵ Ellen G. White, *Mind Character & Personality*, p. 685.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 689.

⁸ Brandon Guameri, “Success Story; Duncan Ryan,” *Men’s Fitness*, <http://www.mensfitness.com/training/success-stories/success-story-duncan-ryan>.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Mind Character & Personality*, p. 694.



Risë has been writing on various health subjects for over 20 years. She has inspired many through her research and down-to-earth writing and speaking style. She believes that healthy living is intimately tied to happiness and wholeness.