

Willpower: Use the power of your will during lockdown

by

Marius Meyer

We all need a little willpower from time to time, not only to survive, but also to grow and to make things happen. The Google dictionary provides a very useful definition of willpower, and that is “control exerted to do something or restrain impulses.” Google goes on to suggest that most of our bad habits are due to laziness or lack of willpower. And then the Cambridge English Dictionary defines willpower as “the ability to control your own thoughts and the way in which you behave.” Cambridge Dictionary provides the following practical example to explain what willpower really is: “It took a lot of willpower to stay calm.” Collins Dictionary states that willpower is “a very strong determination to do something.”

There are some very useful lessons for us in these definitions of what willpower is, in particular as it relates to dealing with the Covid-19 situation and the lockdown:

- We can control our thinking, attitude, behaviour and reaction to the situation;
- We can restrain impulses, for example surely some of us felt at times to break the lockdown rules, but fortunately many people managed to restrain themselves;
- We all have bad habits, such as poor hygiene, a lack of discipline, resistance and non-compliance to rules and regulations;
- Moments of inaction, restlessness and laziness;
- Dealing with our frustrations;
- Staying calm and focused despite the circumstances;
- Being determined to do something, e.g. continue with work and studies or complying with the regulations.

Some of us struggled to come to terms with the initial 21 days of lockdown. Then we had another 14 days extension of the lockdown, and now we are on Day 57 already. It appears as if we have more willpower than we thought. Perhaps the human need to survive is probably the strongest of all human needs.

I had a personal goal of not going out at all during the first 21 days. I achieved that. I managed to keep it up for 53 days, and only went out for the first time on Day 54. I was determined to prove to myself that I can reach the goal of 50 days without going out of our complex. Fortunately, from 1 May when moving down to level 4, it helped to do an early morning walk. But staying focused and disciplined despite the difficult circumstances is how I managed to use my willpower in achieving my goals. And of course, there were days of frustration, anxiety, fear, inaction, poor concentration and despair.

Gillian Bruce-Knight puts willpower in perspective: "Willpower comes from being willing to do something. Either you are willing to do it or you are not. Willpower is that simple." In other words, you decide whether you want to do something, and how well you will do it. Thus, willpower applies to work, studies, family life, chores, or anything you need as you engage on the process of decision-making. Psychologist William McDougall puts it even more simpler language when he says: "Willpower is character in action." Hence, you have an opportunity to display your character to the world when you take actions. Ultimately you are judged by the quality and quantity of your actions.

In the pre-lockdown period when we were still watching sport, I would always support the underdog, whether watching tennis, cricket, rugby or netball. I always want the underdog to win, even when it is clear that the underdog is weaker than the favourite. Most of the time it is predictable that the player or team with the best talent would normally win. But often the favourite or highest ranked individual or team has a bad day and the underdog would win. Sometimes it is not about a bad day only, but the sheer willpower of the underdog. As American swimmer and actor Johnny Weissmuller asserted: "With but few exceptions, it is always the underdog who wins through sheer willpower."

During this period of lockdown, our resilience and perseverance have been tested to its limits. However, it is not a matter of strengths versus weaknesses, but rather whether you are using the power of your will. Victor Hugo puts it so appropriately: "People do not lack strength, they lack will." Therefore, if your will is strong enough, you will make it happen. Over the years we have seen different definitions of competence, and I have reached the stage where I have simplified all these complex definitions of competence in summarising it in six words: The ability to make things happen. The opposite is also true: You are incompetent if you can't make things happen. Orison Swett Marden posits: "A will finds a way." There will be times during this period of lockdown when you will feel stuck and you will not be able to show what you have accomplished. That is the time when willpower is needed. Kenneth W Christian states: "You are only as lazy or lacking in willpower as you think you are."

As the old Chinese proverb goes: "Great souls have wills; feeble ones have only wishes." Sometimes you will write your goals down, but it is then important to use your willpower to follow-through on these ideas. In fact, willpower starts with being willing to do something. Peter Drucker challenged our commitment or willingness: "What you have to do and the way you have to do it is incredibly simple. Whether you are willing to do it, that's another matter."

Honore de Balzac says: "There is no such thing as a great talent without great willpower." Talented people have all the potential in the world to achieve success, yet they don't always realise that potential when they lack the willpower to leverage their own talent. Dan Millman goes further and states: "Willpower is the key to success. Successful people strive no matter what they feel by applying their will to overcome apathy, doubt or fear." Surely, we are now faced with so much apathy, doubt and fear during the Covid-19 crisis, but we can overcome it with our willpower to persevere and to keep achieving the goals and actions we have set out upfront. Use your willpower to get through this lockdown by unleashing the power of your will.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za