

# SELF-DIRECTED **BEHAVIOR**

Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment

*Tenth Edition*



DAVID L. WATSON ■ ROLAND G. THARP



# Self-Directed Behavior

## Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment

TENTH EDITION

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Self-Modification for  
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Tenth Edition***

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*Dedicated to our wives*

*Abby Brown-Watson and Stephanie Stoll Dalton*

*They made our self-directing possible*



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# Preface

This book is designed to acquaint you with a general theory of behavior, to guide you through exercises for developing skills in self-analysis, and to provide you with concrete information on how to achieve the goals you hold for yourself. The most important goal of this volume is to help you achieve more self-determination, more regulated “willpower,” and more control over your own life.

The book can serve as a textbook in psychology courses but does not depend on a formal course structure. Any reader can use it for self-instruction; no “prerequisites” are necessary. Clients of therapists or counselors can use it as an adjunct in planning their own self-change.

You should be warned about one possible side effect: You may become interested in the science of behavior. A number of people delve deeper into the subject as a result of studying this material and in response to the experiential learning that can result from the self-change process.

The vehicle for learning will be your own self-analysis, your own program for implementing your values. Throughout the book, you are urged to accompany your reading with your own self-improvement project. In a sense, your daily life will become the laboratory in which you will study and develop your own behavior.

## **FOREWORD TO THE PROFESSIONAL**

This book’s 10th edition continues the authors’ intentions: to provide scientifically based instruction in the principles and practices of self-applied psychology. In the proliferation of self-help manuals, we have defined our niche as the one that offers an opportunity for students to learn principles of scientific psychology in the laboratory that is most important to them—the laboratory of their own

life problems. Simultaneously, they will learn verified coping skills for personal problem solving.

To achieve these goals, we have set certain standards: to maintain an up-to-date review of all important literature, including both empirical and theoretical publications relevant to self-managed behavior; to maintain accuracy of summary and interpretation so that instructors can be confident in assigning this text; to be conservative in making recommendations that arise only from a secure database; and to advance integrative interpretations that offer some coherence to a vigorous and expanding field. In addition, we employ one further screen: first to do no harm. Thus we do not cover emerging therapeutic techniques unless we are confident that readers can safely use them without professional supervision. And finally, we strive to maintain the readability that has characterized our previous editions.

The field of self-directed behavior began as self-behavior modification, but it has expanded in a vortex that has swept in vicarious and observational learning, cognitive behaviorism and verbal self-control, imagery, and information science. It now includes theoretical and empirical concepts of skills analysis, delay of gratification, learned resourcefulness, control theory, relapse prevention, neo-Vygotskian developmental theory, self-efficacy, commitment theory, decision making, delta theory, attribution theory, self-regulation, behavioral economics, emotional regulation, health and illness behavior, educational settings, the general self-regulation of action, and most recently, delta theory. This enrichment has provided key conceptual links that have made self-direction more coherent, more understandable, and more integrated.

Recently psychology has generated a proliferation of theoretical studies of self-direction, both directly and indirectly. Theoretical and empirical work move knowledge along like right foot and left foot. During the 4 years since the previous edition, the left foot of the theory has been hopping ahead, while the excitement of empirical studies is provided by evaluation of techniques using sophisticated formal design, including meta-analyses. Self-direction is now a mature field, with reliable and effective theory and research-based procedures.

Empirical testing of this book has been uniformly positive: Students using this text in courses have achieved their goals for self-change in percentages varying from 66% to 84% (Brigham, 2002; Clements & Beidleman, 1981; deBortali-Tregerthan, 1984; Deffenbacher & Shepard, 1986; Dodd, 1986; Hamilton, 1980; Rakos & Grodek, 1984) and have also reported a general improvement in lifestyle (Castro, 1987).

The organization of the book is designed to make it as useful as possible for students. Reading can be guided by the *learning objectives* at the beginning of each chapter. Key terms are highlighted in italic, and a special section at the end of each chapter identifies the successive steps of the self-direction project throughout the book. The Tips for Typical Topics, included in most chapters, facilitate rapid formulation of self-modification plans.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Our greatest debt of gratitude is to our students. For 40 years, they have come from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and now also from classes taught nationally and internationally. We learn from our students and their self-change projects as much as we teach; they have made the life of this book possible. The current ages of former students now range from 20 to ... well, receiving Social Security. We have always disguised their identities; we hope that in this anonymity they will all recognize something of themselves. Please accept our thanks, and our tribute to the Unknown Student.

*David L. Watson*  
*Roland G. Tharp*



# For Further Research on the World Wide Web

Here are websites full of psychological information that you may want to peruse:

American Psychological Association	<a href="http://www.apa.org">www.apa.org</a>
Association for Psychological Science	<a href="http://www.psychologicalscience.org">www.psychologicalscience.org</a>
Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies	<a href="http://www.abct.org">www.abct.org</a>
APA Databases	<a href="http://www.psycinfo.com">www.psycinfo.com</a>
Psychology Information Online	<a href="http://www.psychologyinfo.com">www.psychologyinfo.com</a>

Some students like to research their topic of change online. The book *Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health* (Norcross, Santrock, Campbell, & Smith, 2003) lists and evaluates hundreds of sites on 38 topics. From that book as well as from our experience, here are some of the most recommended sites for the topics we list in our Tips for Typical Topics sections:

- **Anxieties and stress**
  - Generalized anxiety disorder  
[www.queendom.com/articles/mentalhealth/gad.html](http://www.queendom.com/articles/mentalhealth/gad.html)
  - Panic anxiety education management  
[www.healthplace.com/communities/anxiety/paems/index.html](http://www.healthplace.com/communities/anxiety/paems/index.html)
  - Anxiety panic Internet resource  
[www.algy.com/anxiety](http://www.algy.com/anxiety)
- **Assertion**
  - Assertiveness  
[www.couns.uiuc.edu/brochures/assertiv.htm](http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/brochures/assertiv.htm)
  - Are you assertive?  
[www.queendom.com/tests/minitests/fx/assertiveness.html](http://www.queendom.com/tests/minitests/fx/assertiveness.html)

- **Depression and low self-esteem**

Depression

[www.nlm.nih.gov/healthinformation/depressionmenu.cfm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/healthinformation/depressionmenu.cfm)

Wings of madness: depression information, news, and support

[www.wingsofmadness.com](http://www.wingsofmadness.com)

Self-esteem—what is it?

[www.positive-way.com/stopping%20your%20inner%20critic.htm](http://www.positive-way.com/stopping%20your%20inner%20critic.htm)

- **Exercise and athletics**

Try searching for “exercise for health” or a specific exercise such as “jogging” on a search engine.

- **Relations with others: social anxieties, social skills, and dating**

Cooperative communications skills

[www.newconversations.net](http://www.newconversations.net)

- **Smoking, drinking, and using drugs**

Web of Addictions

[www.well.com/user/woa](http://www.well.com/user/woa)

HabitSmart

[www.habitsmart.com](http://www.habitsmart.com)

- **Studying and time management**

Thomson Wadsworth College Success Solutions

[www.thomsonedu.com/success](http://www.thomsonedu.com/success)

- **Weight loss and overeating**

Calorie Control Council

[www.caloriecontrol.org](http://www.caloriecontrol.org)

Weight loss

<http://weightloss.about.com>

Learning about other ideas and getting in touch with other people wrestling with the same issues can be a big help. Here are two books that list and evaluate hundreds of web resources dealing with all aspects of mental health, adjustment, and self-help. Just look up the topics of interest to you, and plug into websites devoted exclusively to those topics.

- John M. Grohol (2000). *The Insider's Guide to Mental Health Resources Online*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- John C. Norcross et al. (2003). *Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Resources in Mental Health*. New York: The Guilford Press.

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# The Skills of Self-Direction

“The intelligent want self-control. Children want candy.”  
RUMI (1207–1273), PERSIAN SUFI POET.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

<b>Self-Regulation</b>	<b>Does Self-Modification Really Work?</b>
<b>The Skills of Self-Regulation</b>	<b>Chapter Summary</b>
<b>Behavior and Its Context</b>	<b>Your Own Self-Direction</b>
<b>The Process of Self-Modification</b>	<b>Project: Step 1</b>

## SELF-REGULATION

*Important:* Each section of a chapter begins with a set of learning objectives in which all the major points in the section are listed. The learning objectives are phrased as questions. Read these objectives before reading each section. They tell you what to look for. When you can answer all the questions, you have mastered the section.

### *Learning Objectives*

What is self-regulation or self-direction?

What is the best way to study this book?

What is the strength model of self-control? What is self-control fatigue?

What is the difference between brute willpower and planned self-control?

We humans regulate our actions minute to minute. If you're talking too quietly or mumbling and realize others cannot understand you, you make changes

before continuing to speak. If you're jogging too fast and are getting out of breath, you slow down. If you are driving over the speed limit and think, "I may get a ticket," you make changes. We often make changes in our personal lives too. At a meal you might think, "I've had enough, I'm getting full," and stop eating. In a discussion with a friend you might think, "She looks bored, I think I'll change the topic."

To regulate something means that we control it or direct it by a principle—such as the small principles of being interesting or avoiding a ticket. We regulate our actions to reach many different goals—getting good grades, being attractive, or avoiding overeating. We make adjustments.

Self-regulation implies the ability to control ourselves, to exert control over our own acts and inner processes.

The terms *self-direction* and *self-regulation* emphasize different aspects of the same thing. We self-direct our thoughts, our feelings, our impulses, and our behaviors. We have the capacity of self-control, to direct our own self-modification.

Self-regulation occurs in short time spans, as when we speak more clearly to avoid mumbling, and over long time spans, as when we consciously eat less and exercise more over several months so we can lose weight, or when we engage in time management over an entire college career to help ourselves study more effectively.

Being able to self-direct allows us to modify our behavior to gain desirable outcomes. We change the topic to avoid boring a friend. We stop drinking to avoid getting drunk. We spend more time studying to improve our grades. We work on our listening skills to better please our partner.

The more people self-direct, the better it seems to be for them. To say that someone has "high self-control" means that he or she can successfully self-regulate in a variety of situations—at school, at mealtime, at a party, when sick, with other people. One study of 1,000 children followed them from childhood to age 32 and found that those with higher self-control had better health, less criminal behavior, less substance dependence, and better finances (Moffitt et al., 2011). People who are high in self-control make better grades in school, are less depressed and less anxious, have higher self-esteem, enjoy more satisfying intimate relationships, and are more popular (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Some theorists now say that that self-control "is more important than IQ" in determining our lives (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005) and is "the hidden dimension" of personal competence (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005) (Box 1.1).

Moreover, there doesn't seem to be a down side. High self-control does not mean a miserable overcontrol (Tangney et al., 2004). A high degree of self-control makes it possible to give up control, when it is appropriate and pleasant.

So how can we increase self-control? Where does self-regulation come from? Research and theory point to the idea that it is a learned skill (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), although there may be some inherited elements



### Box 1.1 How to Study This Book

At the beginning of each section of each chapter is a set of learning objectives that are phrased as questions. The learning objectives cover all the major points in the section. Learn the answers to those questions. If you can answer them, you have mastered the material.

Here are some steps to follow in learning the material (Robinson, 1970).

Students who follow a procedure like this get better grades, *particularly* if they have *not* been doing well (Pintrich, McKeachie, & Yin, 1987).

Follow this procedure for each section:

1. To get an overview, read the learning objectives at the beginning of the section and the corresponding part of the chapter summary.
2. Read the section.
3. Reread the summary.
4. Answer the learning objective questions for the section.

To better remember the material, tie the ideas to your own life. For example, if you were reading about relaxation techniques, ask yourself, "How could I use this in my life?"

When you are studying for an exam, give yourself a practice test by answering the learning objectives. Check your answers against the text.

This method may sound cumbersome compared with your present way of studying, but research has shown that it is the best way to learn the material in a textbook (Kirschenbaum & Perri, 1982). As you practice the method, it will become easier and easier for you. Try developing it one part at a time.

(Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Children learn self-control as they grow and have different experiences (Eisenberg, Smith, & Spinrad, 2011). Because it is learned it varies within a person depending upon the situation. You have learned better in some situations than others. You might have wonderful self-control over your eating, and show the world a slim, attractive figure, but have little control over your worrying, and inside feel tense and distracted. You might be a superb student with an easy ability to self-regulate your studying, but be less polished and less in control in your social life.

Each person is better at self-regulating some behaviors than others. You may feel that you eat too much and wish you could better self-regulate your eating. But do you have the skill to change? Do people who self-regulate this behavior successfully seem a marvel? A slim friend says, "Yes, I decided I was about five pounds overweight, so I just took it off." You listen with mouth agape, you who have been trying to control your eating for years.

All of us have certain goals we cannot reach "just like that." You might easily increase studying when that is necessary, whereas your slim friend needs to do the same thing but lacks the skill. When we have the ability to change ourselves, we have the skills that make up successful self-regulation. What are those skills? Is it the exercise of willpower or self-control?

## Self-Control and Willpower

Willpower or self-control: How do we define and understand those words? Two examples will make the issues clear.

Some people speak as though willpower involves standing in the face of temptation, fists clenched, jaw tight, refusing to do what one shouldn't do, even though one wants to do it. After several decades of practicing chastity, for example, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), the famous teacher of nonviolent civil disobedience, sometimes slept with attractive young female followers to demonstrate his ability to abstain from sex. He faced down any temptations he felt through supreme willpower. We don't know if he had to clench his jaws, but he succeeded. We might call this brute self-control, success gained by a deliberate, effortful exercise of willpower (Cervone, Mor, Orom, Shadel, & Scott, 2011).

In Homer's *Odyssey*, written about 800 B.C., for the second example, Odysseus and his crew sailed through straits where the Sirens sang a song so alluring that it drew sailors to their deaths on the rocks. Odysseus wanted to hear the Sirens' wonderful music, but he wanted to avoid sailing too close. He ordered his men to lash him to the mast and no matter how much he begged to be set free to keep him there until they had passed through the straits. Then he plugged their ears with wax so they could carry out his orders and row safely through without hearing the music (Ainslee, 1975). We can call this planned or skilled self-control, the execution of an effective coping strategy to deal with temptation through prior planning and management of the situation.

Lately, there has been an explosion of research on brute self-control, leading to what is called the "strength model" of willpower (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Kelly McGonigal made the simplest statement of the theory: "Self-control is like a muscle. When used, it gets tired" (2012, p. 57). If you have to withstand temptation for a long period, your self-control will eventually weaken and you will give in. This effect has been given various names. We call it *self-control fatigue*.

In one study, for example, one group of students was given chocolate chip cookies to eat, whereas a second group was asked to resist the cookies and eat radishes instead (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven & Tice, 1998). Both groups were then asked to work on solving impossible geometry puzzles, a frustrating task which requires self-control to continue. How long would they work? Those who had to expend self-control energy resisting the cookies gave up on the impossible tasks much sooner. Their brute self-control muscle seemed to be tired out. Like physical strength, brute self-control is a limited resource (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

There have been nearly a hundred research studies on various aspects of this theory with some interesting results:

- If you have to expend self-control energy on a challenging task, you may engage in less exercise later (Ginis & Bray, 2010). You're fatigued.

- Choosing whether to conform to a group or not, requiring social self-control, can lead to eating more (Kahan, Polivy, & Herman, 2003).
- Suppressing your emotional state can lead to less control over your eating later (Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). People in relationships whose self-control was experimentally fatigued, compared to people who were not fatigued, were more likely to respond with violence when provoked by their partner (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009).
- People whose self-control had been experimentally fatigued were more likely to stick to their own opinions and less likely to consider other points of view or other information (Fischer, Greitemeier, & Frey, 2008).
- Just making decisions on things like what college courses to take or what items to buy reduces self-control so that research subjects later showed less physical stamina, more procrastination, and less persistence in the face of failure (Vohs et al., 2008).

The conclusion: Brute self-control weakens with use, just as muscles do. We need to arrange things so that we don't rely heavily on brute self-control, for it is likely to weaken. To rely on staring down temptations is not a good plan. But there is much that we can do to keep self-control strong. There is much we can learn to do to develop greater self-control to manage situations successfully. It is not a matter of will, but of skill.

For example, skillful users of self-control don't let themselves get into situations where massive willpower is needed. If you don't want to have sex with someone, it is not smart to get into bed with him or her in the first place. Odysseus knew his brute self-control would fail, so he tied himself to the mast. Thus he avoided the need for brute self-control by applying control beforehand.

Planning ahead for temptation, in fact, has been shown by research to be effective in heading off the need for brute self-control (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2011). It avoids self-control fatigue. If you know you're going to be at a party where a lot of people will be drinking heavily and you don't want to do that, then plan ahead for how you will cope—don't go at all, or leave early, count and limit the drinks you have, drink lots of nonalcoholic drinks, alternate nonalcoholic and alcoholic drinks, hang out with the nondrinkers, and so on—these are excellent tactics.

Good, well-planned self-regulation reduces the need for brute self-control (Dvorak & Simons, 2009). And if you practice self-regulation you become more skilled, so it becomes easier, and self-control fatigue is less likely to occur (Converse & DeShon, 2009). In fact, this whole book teaches you strategies to follow to avoid having to rely on brute self-control. In Chapter 2, you will learn how to imbue your plans for change with your important goals so that you are more likely to persevere. In Chapter 3, we show how greater self-awareness helps your planning. Planning ahead, regulating things beforehand, is the theme of all the subsequent chapters, designed to help you develop the skills you need to make the modifications you want.

## THE SKILLS OF SELF-REGULATION

### *Learning Objectives*

What are the implications of thinking of self-regulation as a skill?

What are the important elements of a skill?

Explain the idea of a person/situation interaction in affecting behavior.

Explain the purpose of this book.

A skill is the ability to do something well, developed through knowledge and practice. If one person practices certain behaviors while another does not, we expect that the person who practices will become more skilled at those behaviors.

We may have an aptitude for certain skills—we are able to learn them easily—but in all cases, we understand that skills have to be learned. It does not surprise us to learn that our friend who has been practicing the piano 6 hours a day has become a skilled musician. Nor are we surprised to learn that many great musicians come from families in which music is an important part of daily life. The opportunity to develop skill is an important precursor of the development of musical skill.

The idea of skill implies skill in a specific domain, such as playing the piano or tennis, or speaking Spanish. We do not necessarily expect a skilled pianist to be skilled at languages.

We do not learn general skills that apply across a wide range of situations but rather specific ones that apply to specific tasks (Campitelli & Gobet, 2011; Patrick, 1992). *The same thing is true of the skills of self-regulation:* You might be skilled at controlling your weight but not at avoiding procrastination. You might do a brilliant job of controlling your studying in school, but seem to have little control over certain negative thoughts that depress you.

Being skilled implies that one can perform some action in spite of the fact that the task varies (Fischer, 1980). A soccer player who could kick a goal only from one precise spot on the field would not be considered skilled. It is the ability to kick from any position, through opposing players, having received the ball from various other positions on the field and at different speeds, that makes a player skilled.

Self-regulation is not just “muscular” willpower. It is “a skill involving anticipation and cleverness, so that immediate and tempting rewards do not impede progress toward a long-range goal” (Fisher, Levenkron, Lowe, Loro, & Green, 1982, p. 174). Odysseus made sure that the temptations of the Sirens did not lead away from his long-range goal. One of our dieting students said, “You know, I realized that for years I’d been trying the Gandhi approach, staring at tempting food and trying to resist it, but usually failing. Once I realized this, I switched techniques, and did things like distracting myself or distancing myself so I wouldn’t have to stare down temptation.” He had learned a skill.

If self-regulation, or self-direction, is a skill, we must think about both the behavior we need to perform and the situations in which we will perform it. Our goals for self-regulation are defined in terms of particular behaviors in

particular situations. If you can kick a goal only from one spot on the field but your position on the field keeps changing, then you need to practice kicking from a variety of spots. If self-direction is a skill, we must practice the skill in different conditions, and we know that only with practice will we improve.

### What Keeps You from Reaching Certain Goals?

What should you do to change yourself when you want to? The answer to this depends upon your view of what has been keeping you from reaching your goals. For example, if you want to get along better with other people, but have not, what keeps you from reaching your goal?

Consider our student, Calvin, who can't hold a job for more than a few weeks, even though he is 21 and needs the money. Calvin knows something is wrong.

But what? How Calvin thinks about the problem has a strong impact on what he thinks should be done about it. There are different ways to think about a problem in self-regulation, and each has a different implication for Calvin's response.

We could say, for example, that all Calvin needs to do is "visualize success," simply imagining himself successful in his work. If he imagines it, it will happen. All he has to do is visualize? If it were only so easy! Or, we could say that Calvin has a bad astrological sign, is unlucky in his stars. But then there is nothing to be done but wait to see what happens. Some people like to talk about visualization, astrology, crystals, or pyramids as party chatter, but should we take these ideas seriously when faced with important life problems? *Not if we really want to do something about our lives.* As Shakespeare says in *Julius Caesar*, "The fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

It's not just that Calvin has some inner personality problem.

A better way of thinking about such strengths and weaknesses is to realize that they are tied to particular situations. In the situation with-girlfriend, Calvin succeeds; in the situation need-to-go-to-work, Calvin struggles. When faced with the situation I-have-to-do-my-assignment, you are able to do what has to be done, but when in the situation I-should-relax-on-this-date, you don't do what has to be done.

Many people overlook the impact different situations have on them, and instead explain their own behavior by referring to their personality traits (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). This probably stems from the belief that our personality is something we carry around with us, projecting it out onto whatever situation we are in. In fact, modern psychology has learned that our behavior changes from situation to situation (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). We don't project the same personality all the time, but change our behavior as we go from one situation to another. A person who is normally warm and outgoing might find himself or herself suddenly shy in a novel social situation. Alternative ways of thinking about this are outlined in Figure 1.1.

"*I am ... when ...*" You may not have the habit of thinking about yourself this way. You may think, "I am ... and then fill in particular words or thoughts

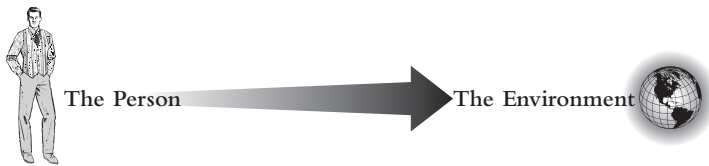
**Alternative 1: Explanation by the environment.**

Events outside the person, such as luck, fate, other people, or the situation.



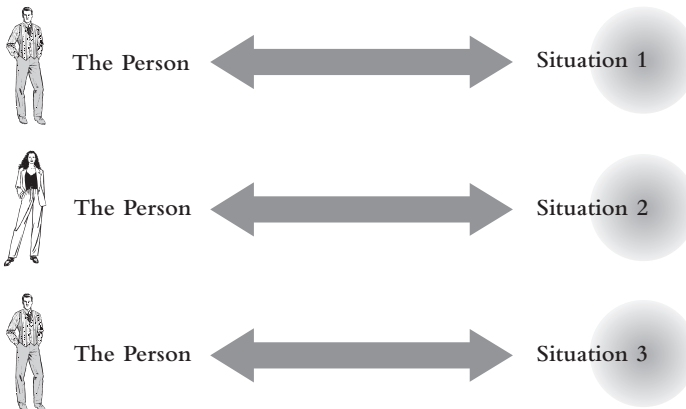
**Alternative 2: Explanation by the personal.**

The causes of behavior are found within the person, in willpower or lack of it, in personality traits or as symptoms of inner disorders.



**Alternative 3: Explanation by the person/situation interaction.**

The person's behavior changes from one situation to the next, depending on personal skills appropriate to different situations. This is the point of view of much of modern psychology and is the one we will adopt in this book.



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**FIGURE 1.1** Three ways of thinking about the relationship between a person and the environment.

that describe your general personality. You might think, “I am ... ‘shy’ ... ‘brave’ ... ‘smart’ ... ‘insecure’ ... ‘happy.’” There is a very long list of words you could use to describe yourself.

This way of thinking about yourself ignores the effect of the situation on your behavior. You are probably not always shy, or always happy, or always anything. To think that way ignores the effect of the environment. Most of the time our behavior is an interaction between ourselves and our environment.

You will explain yourself more clearly if you think like this: “I am ... when ...” For example, “I am shy when dealing with parties” (but not when dealing with my family). “I am brave when dealing with bullies” (but not when dealing with professors). “I am self-controlled when dealing with cigarettes” (but not when dealing with desserts).

Thinking in terms of “I am ... when” instead of simply “I am ...” leads to a more fine-grained, more accurate understanding of yourself (Mendoza-Denton, Ayduk, Mischel, Shoda, & Testa, 2001). Using only “I am ...” encourages you to think of yourself in global, stereotyped ways, but using “I am ... when ...” gives you a more precise understanding of your own behavior.

People who fail to stay on their diet sometimes blame their personalities or their weak “willpower,” but in fact the blame usually lies in how they react to very specific situations (Jeffrey, French, & Schmid, 1990). Most of the time they control their eating well, but not when they are very hungry. Some diabetic patients go off their special diets even when it leads to poor health, but personality or temperament is not the cause. Situational factors such as feeling stressed or pressured by others to eat are the causes (Goodall & Halford, 1992). Problems in self-regulation are understood by analyzing skills in specific situations. To increase self-control, for example, the person with diabetes might need to learn how to resist other people urging him or her to eat.

### Task/Skill Mismatches

Whatever skills one has, there are always tasks that call for more than one can muster, whether it be the fairly good tennis player matched against the state champion, or the person unskilled in resisting good food faced with a table of tempting morsels. There are times when one’s skills at self-direction are not up to the task at hand (Karoly, 1993; McFall & Dodge, 1982). Because people differ in their level of skill, an easy task for one person may be difficult for another. Our slim friend takes off 5 pounds “just like that,” but we cannot. Some tasks call for skills that we have not yet learned.

All of us experience times when our usual self-control skills fail us. In these situations, we self-regulate in a more self-conscious fashion (Karoly, 1993; Kirschenbaum & Flanery, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1988). A planned, continuing effort to change behavior to cope with a task we cannot presently master is often called *self-modification*.

In specific situations, some people are more skilled at self-control than others. For example, when a person is in a stressful situation, it is not simply how much stress the person experiences but how the person copes with stress