



# TAKING CONTROL OF YOURSELF



## Introduction

Ever heard of Dr Faustus? In a well-known play, he was the chap who sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for twenty-four years of ultimate personal indulgence. Amongst other things, he gets to kiss the incomparable beauty, Helen of Troy.

Imagine: utterly indulging every hedonistic whim, every pleasure that comes to mind and body. Having all you want, when you want; a lifetime, almost, of instant gratification and endless delights.

However, there's a price to pay.

For Dr Faustus, when it came time for the Devil to collect, he demanded (*as had been the agreement*) one earthly soul. Of course, Faustus had come to believe he renege on the blood-signed deal, and he'd never have to pay for satisfying all his appetites for so many years. Of course, he was wrong.

If only, poor Dr Faustus had used a little impulse control. But we shouldn't judge him too harshly; after all, who *hasn't* given into impulse and had to face the consequences? After all, that's what crisps and cakes are for.

---

*We're all Dr Faustus (potentially)*

---

The Faustian pact. This pact with the 'Devil' isn't perhaps so much a story as an illustrative pattern of what happens often, in many places, within all types of people and environments. The habitual or capricious lack of impulse control, without reflecting on consequences can lead to regret, guilt and some cases despair.

Read the news today and you'll find Dr Faustus in the guise of a sex-scandal-enmeshed politician or a drug-addled 'train wreck' celebrity. Or Dr Faustus might be posing as a financier recklessly bringing his or her bank to the brink of meltdown.

Enjoy now, pay later: then be shocked or outraged by just how much you have to pay. That's the classic pact with 'the devil' - that's Dr Faustus.

---

*The pitfalls of low impulse control*

---

Of course, not all misfortune is down to lack of self-control. Bad things happen to good people and people can experience hard financial times or poor health after making wise and judicious choices.

To genuinely believe you can 100% control what happens to you is too simplistic.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and renowned Psychotherapist, expressed the view that, *"It is the last human of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. To choose one's own way."*

And this is the core of impulse control. We can choose our own way. We have direct control over our emotions and feelings, and although it can, sometimes, be a monumental task to govern ourself – it is doable. And usually, worth it.

Avoiding what are perceived as *'hard decisions'* often generate unwanted consequences. *We become a result of the decisions we make.* And so, our health, relationships, happiness, career, finances and friends have the potential of being adversely affected.

---

*Hindsight is the son of wisdom, brother of insight and the father of regret.*

---

Still, what we do know, is that all the evidence shows that low impulse control tends to lead to *greater* unhappiness, poorer mental health, and increased lifestyle-induced illness and earlier death.

Equally, a lack of impulse control lies at the heart of impatience, anger, reactive behaviour, moodiness and emotional extremes. By the same measure, too much impulse control causes unassertiveness, loss of voice and opinions, timidity and victimhood.

Here are five suggestions you might want to consider when trying to develop impulse control and self-governance.

---

*1. Think about what impulses you want to control ahead of time*

---

Being impulsive about going to the park or visiting a friend is a valuable human trait to possess. It offers variety and a move away from the mundane.

However, in many situations which you may consider are going to be emotive or risk making you feel vulnerable, it is worth planning for the emotions that might come to the fore.

---

## *2. Before the impulse takes hold, think where the consequences may lead*

---

If Dr Faustus had sat down and really thought hard about what selling his soul for the promise of a few years of unbridled pleasure would actually entail, he may have been less tempted to sign on the Devil's dotted line.

We know not to jump out of high buildings, even though falling through the air might be fun, because we all know the consequences of landing. We know the price to pay - and there's always a price. That's what stops us: a real awareness of the consequences.

So, whether it's smoking, gambling, getting angry or blaming or bullying someone, why not sit down and really think about all the possible - even likely - long- or short-term consequences of those actions.

In this way, you can exercise the most sophisticated and recent (in evolutionary terms) development in your brain: the pre-frontal lobes, which are there in part for long-term advantage and bigger-picture thinking.

---

## *3. Don't make excuses for your impulsiveness*

---

Justifications for poor impulse control are easy to generate. Classic excuses include: *The other person deserved or started it. I just can't help myself. Well, now they know how I feel. Why should I care. I didn't want to lose my temper but I felt I had no choice.*

Of course, there may be some level of mitigation in any situation but we should remember the words of Viktor Frankl – *'we all have the freedom to choose a different approach'*.

---

## *4. Watch out for the triggers*

---

An impulse at its core is an emotion. This means because of body chemistry, there is a corresponding physical reaction. This physical symptom of an impulse can be felt in any part of the body.

The head, chest, solar plexus, stomach, heart, a tingling in the fingers or a flushing of the face. Everybody feels impulses differently, but the impulse-body connection is an important step in managing them.

Try to identify where you feel an impulse and then in the future you can bring greater self-awareness and control to any impulses you may feel.

---

## 5. *Breathe*

---

As simple as it may appear, taking a deep breath as you feel the impulse taking hold, is a marvellous way of hijacking the impulse into a more reasonable and objective response. Equally, it offers a little more time to gather your thoughts and be less impulsive.

One wonders how the life of Faustus would have been different had he followed these simple tips. I hope you have better luck than the good Doctor.

If you have questions about panic attacks or are seeking solutions, please contact me via email: [steve@iotherapy.net](mailto:steve@iotherapy.net)