



# THE DUALITY OF DESIRE

## As people struggle to balance their impulsive and considered sides, design may hold the key

The tension between our competing selves has been written about for years: the id and the ego, the devil and the angel. In our daily choices, the negotiation of these two sides sits at the epicenter of a healthy (or unhealthy) lifestyle.

For most people, this delicate balancing act has become increasingly difficult, with many of the problems we face—obesity, climate change, escalating consumer debt—stemming from our impulsive sides winning

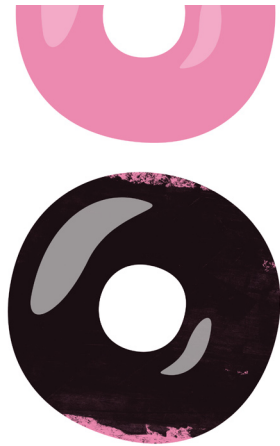
out far too often. And businesses, eager for their own instant gratification in the form of increased profits, are all too eager to help.

As designers seeking to make a positive impact on people, we need to better understand and design for these two sides.

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### TAKE ACTION – *designing for Life's Changes*

- 1. Turn on the light**  
Too often our choices are made in ignorance. Bring greater consciousness to decisions by providing useful information (i.e. caloric information on restaurant menus so we know what our meal is “costing” us, both financially and physically).
  - 2. Don't delay gratification**  
Making healthy choices often requires long-term thinking. Design rewards that can be experienced and enjoyed immediately as people work towards their longer-term goal (i.e. the Wii Fit making exercise fun in the moment).
  - 3. Design for one second**  
Self-sabotage happens in the blink of an eye. Help provide safeguards and other forms of backup to dissuade people during that one second when they instinctively grab for that unhealthy food item or swipe that troublesome credit card.
  - 4. Feed the beast**  
Our impulsive sides can be ravenous. Rather than deny these powerful forces, why not feed our impulsive desires with healthier substitutes (i.e. delivering the “thrill of the find” without the purchase or accumulation of more debt and junk)?
  - 5. Create safe havens**  
Sometimes the best way to manage the battle is to eliminate the battlefield. More and more we see people seeking out environments that reduce choice and protect them from their impulsive sides (e.g., the NetSpend card that doesn't allow users to spend more than they have).
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## Voices of temptation

Greg, an obese diabetic, tells the story of one Sunday morning when he sat in a CVS parking lot struggling with his temptation to cross the street for a half-dozen doughnuts.

A conversation ensued between his impulsive and considered sides:

*Impulsive Greg: Greg, those doughnuts are over there, and they are hot, they're fresh. They're not even an hour old. Go get one.*

*Considered Greg: No, turkey; don't do that. You're a diabetic. That's pure sugar.*

*Impulsive Greg: Oh, but do it just the one time. You know, just one time. Get a half a dozen, go home, share it with mother.*

*Considered Greg: I may go into a diabetic coma. What may happen to mother then?*

*Greg says, "It was just like the devil sitting on your shoulder. I was doing pretty good at battling it and resisting. But, boy, that was all she wrote when she would take them out of the fryer, or whatever caused the odor to come across the street."*



Sue and Tim, a married couple living in Sacramento, are like most Americans when it comes to financial health. They live paycheck to paycheck, and have their fair share of credit card debt, a sizeable mortgage and a savings account of exactly \$1. However, Sue reveals that she also has a secret savings account in Oregon for an emergency or vacation. She hides the money from her husband because she fears they'd eventually spend it all if he knew about it. His impulsive side is the activation for her own impulsive side, so hiding the money is the only way to ensure she stays in control.



## In the heat of the moment

Twenty-nine year old Jaclyn knows the dangers of unprotected sex all too well. A single mother who had an unexpected pregnancy as a teenager, she now counsels teen women on the topic at her church. With such a strong understanding of and empathy for accidental pregnancy, she was convinced she'd never allow herself to make the same mistake twice. She was wrong.

Several months ago, contrary to everything she understands and counsels others about, Jaclyn had unprotected sex with her current boyfriend and got pregnant again. It was all impulse. "When you're in heat like a bunny, I guess... you can't stop it or control it. It's just, NO! I want it now!"

Jaclyn has not told a soul. After all she's been through, she's embarrassed she made the same mistake again, and that despite everything she knows, was not able to control her impulsive side.

## A frictionless society

Businesses are increasingly recognizing the power of impulse and figuring out how to short-circuit our considered side. Central to this effort has been the relentless focus on lowering barriers to consumption. Coca-Cola pioneered the idea of frictionless temptation with the "Coke within an arm's reach" strategy in the '90s. Retailers and credit card companies have made the very act of purchasing frictionless—with the simple swipe of a card. While these strategies are good for business, they disempower our considered side and have exacerbated the consumption problem we share as a society.

## Two sides of Martin

Martin reflects on his morning run, describing his two competing selves as "Evening Martin" and "Morning Martin." Evening Martin wants to stay healthy, and vows to go running each morning. But when the alarm rings, Morning Martin hits snooze and keeps sleeping. Morning Martin likes how the warm bed feels, and rationalizes that it's OK to run tomorrow. Eventually Evening Martin learned to outfox Morning Martin by arranging to meet a friend for his run. The accountability and commitment he feels towards his friend supports his considered side and keeps impulsive Morning Martin in check.

## The willpower card

NetSpend is a leading provider of prepaid debit accounts. Designed for our considered sides, these cards put hard limits on spending and make it impossible to accumulate credit card debt. They are a godsend for people who have struggled with their impulses and credit card debt in the past and who are trying to establish more responsible spending habits.



## Books on duality

*Nudge*, by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, talks about our reflective and automatic modes of thinking, and proposes a new science of choice architecture to nudge people towards healthier decisions. In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt writes, "We make pronouncements, vows and resolutions, and then are surprised by our own powerlessness to carry them out." He describes a rider atop an elephant as a metaphor for our divided mind, with our considered sides (the rider) trying unsuccessfully to control our impulsive sides (the elephant).

PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

**Be a pattern spotter:** Now that you've been exposed to a few different examples, don't be surprised if you start seeing *Life's Changes* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it's the next new pattern.

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