Sheila Love IMPACT-ology Mastermind

“Sheila Love — Where Everything Is Possible”

LESSON 15

Trigger Loops 2: Why Willpower Fails

Position	Lesson 15 of 20
Duration	40–50 minutes
Age Group	12–18 years, Liberia, West Africa
Core Idea	Willpower alone is too weak to beat an automatic trigger loop. What actually drives behavior is thought and feeling in the moment, not intention alone.

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain why willpower alone usually fails against a trigger loop

2. Distinguish 'force' from 'flow' as two different ways of trying to change

3. Reflect on a personal attempt to change something using willpower alone

4. Identify the thought or feeling that actually fuels their named trigger loop

2. OPENING HOOK (5 minutes)

Ask: “Has anyone ever decided, firmly, to stop doing something, and done it again within the same week anyway?”

Let the honest laughter happen. Most hands will go up eventually.

> “That's not weak willpower. That's the wrong tool for the job. Today we find out why.”

3. CORE CONTENT

Why Willpower Loses

Willpower alone usually fails. It isn't strong enough to fight an automatic trigger loop by pure force, because the loop runs in the subconscious, and willpower lives mostly in the conscious mind.

It's like trying to hold back a river with your hands. You might manage it for a moment. Not for long.

Thoughts and Feelings Run the Loop

What actually drives behavior, moment to moment, is thought and feeling, not a decision made once, days earlier, at your calmest.

By the time the trigger fires, the calm decision is somewhere else. What's present is whatever thought and feeling the trigger just produced.

Force Versus Flow

Using force against yourself is exhausting. It works occasionally, briefly, and then collapses.

You need to find the flow instead, a way of moving with the loop's structure rather than only bracing against it. That flow is what the next lesson builds.

4. STORY: ‘THE THIRD TRY’

THE THIRD TRY

Nowai had decided, three separate times that term, to stop checking her phone the instant a message arrived during evening study.

Each time, the decision felt solid when she made it. Each time, within two or three days, she was reaching for the phone again the moment it buzzed, homework forgotten mid-sentence.

By the third failed attempt, she had started to believe something was actually wrong with her discipline.

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Her older cousin, home for the weekend from university in Monrovia, found her frustrated over the same exercise book, phone face-down beside her, buzzing insistently.

“That's the fourth time in ten minutes,” her cousin observed.

“I know. I told myself I wouldn't check it.”

“How's that going?”

Nowai didn't need to answer.

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“You keep deciding with your calm brain,” her cousin said, “and then fighting it with your annoyed, curious brain twenty minutes later. That's not a fair fight. The calm brain isn't even in the room anymore by then.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just have no willpower at all?”

“No. You're supposed to stop using force against yourself and figure out something smarter instead. Force gets tired. There's a better way.”

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Nowai wasn't fully convinced, but she noticed, honestly, that her cousin had described exactly what kept happening. The decision was real. It just wasn't present at the actual moment the phone buzzed.

She put the phone in another room that evening, out of decision's reach entirely, and got through forty minutes of uninterrupted study for the first time in weeks.

It wasn't willpower that had done it. She wasn't sure yet what to call it instead.

5. ACTIVITY (10 minutes)

Materials: any paper, any pen or pencil.

1. Write down a time you used pure willpower to try to change something, and it didn't hold.

2. Write down what the calm decision felt like when you first made it.

3. Write down what thought or feeling was actually present in the moment the trigger fired, days or hours later.

4. Notice the gap between the two. Write one sentence describing it.

6. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is something you've tried to change with willpower alone, and how did it go?

2. Why do you think the calm decision often isn't 'in the room' when the trigger actually fires?

3. What's the difference between using force and finding flow, in your own words?

4. What thought or feeling actually fuels the trigger loop you named last lesson?

7. FACILITATOR NOTES

This lesson can feel discouraging if left unresolved. Be clear that Lesson 16 provides the actual solution; today is diagnosis, not despair.

Some students will admit to genuinely difficult habits (anger, avoidance, escape into distraction). Normalize the willpower failure without excusing harmful behavior.

Nowai's solution, physically removing the phone, is one example of flow over force. Encourage students to think of their own version rather than copying hers directly.

Keep today's identified thought or feeling. It feeds directly into next lesson's intervention design.

8. BRIDGE TO LESSON 16

Before students leave, ask:

“If force doesn't work, and you need flow instead, what do you think an actual, practical flow looks like?”

Let them guess.

“We build one next time.”