

## What the Marshmallow Test Can Teach Us

Some years ago psychologist Walter Mischel explored young children's ability to delay gratification by sitting them down in front of three marshmallows, two on one side and one on the other. Each child was given the choice of having one marshmallow immediately or waiting until the experimenter returned and having the other two. Then the child was left alone with all three marshmallows for about 20 minutes. Twenty minutes is a long time for a 4 year old to wait for anything, and sure enough, hidden cameras revealed the struggles these children went through to put off temptation. Later the test was administered with more sophisticated temptations to school aged children and teenagers. In each study some children were able to avoid the temptation by finding ways of distracting themselves from what Mischel calls the "hot properties" of the item. Instead of thinking about how yummy the marshmallow was, they imagined it as a lump of cotton or as a mere picture of a marshmallow. As one child said, "You can't eat a picture!" Others shifted their thinking outside the room to what they planned to do later, or made up mental games having nothing to do with marshmallows to get through the waiting period. Follow-up studies found that those children who could delay gratification were more successful in school and employment later in life. Mischel's new book *The Marshmallow Test* (Little, Brown, 2014) summarizes this research and provides useful strategies for delaying gratification that work for both children and adults.

Mischel also has a lot to say about stopping unhealthy behaviors in general. One reason why we so often give in to immediate temptation is because we discount the negative consequences that will accrue in the future. To withstand these urges it is necessary to "heat up" the negative emotions you will feel in the future and experience them in the present. It also helps to heat up the positive emotions you will feel in the future when you avoid the urge. As an example, consider a cash bonus you get from your employer. You immediately think of a weekend getaway, how much fun it would be. You get a little excited just picturing yourself there. It takes some effort to consider other options for that cash, such as depositing it in your savings account or making an extra payment on your car. What do you do? In such cases as this, shift your thoughts away from dreaming about the getaway and consider other things you could do with that money. Imagine how good it would feel to pay off the car early and go a few years without a monthly payment! It also helps to take a second, colder look at the immediate gratification: consider the effort it will take to make reservations for that weekend, the time involved, how much you will overeat or drink, how much harder you will have to work at dieting when you get home, etc.

Mischel also suggests creating an "If-Then" plan for dealing with temptation. First identify internal and external cues that trigger the "If" part of the plan. Using our example above, an external cue might be an ad for cheap air fare to Hawaii; an internal cue might be feeling bored. Devise a plan for those cues that feed the urge to go with the immediate temptation. Each plan

should be simple, quick, and easy to execute. For example, “If an ad for cheap air fare to Hawaii catches my eye, then I will turn the page without reading it,” or “If I start to feel bored, then I will not thumb through a travel magazine but get out of my chair and walk to the drinking fountain.” The plan should take your attention away from the temptation. As with any new habit, practice will help it stick.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of *The Marshmallow Test* is that “will power” is not an inborn trait. The children who couldn’t wait and ate the marshmallows simply had not learned the skills the other children used. Once they learned them, they got better at delaying gratification. Thus self-control is a habit that can be learned, provided that you are aware of your temptations and that you put some effort into learning strategies for dealing with them. Self-control increases by withstanding easy temptations and then working up to more difficult ones. So how long can you wait before grabbing that marshmallow dangling in front of you? 5 minutes? A month? A decade? The effort is up to you.

*The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self Control*, by Walter Mischel.  
2014, Little, Brown, New York