



BETTER TO DENY THAN TO GRATIFY?

Would you eat it? Or could you wait? Decades after the landmark Marshmallow Test, the debate over impulse control—and how much of it is really a good thing—is raging again

By Amanda FitzSimons

In the early '80s, while sitting in his office in the psychology department at Stanford, Walter Mischel realized he had a big—a *huge*—discovery on his hands. His first batch of test subjects was about to graduate from high school, and those who 14 years earlier had proved themselves adept at delaying gratification—here, in the form of a marshmallow—were reporting higher SAT scores (higher by roughly 200 points) and cleaner rap sheets than the ones who'd been unable to hold out.

Nearly half a century after Mischel began this research, his work is massively influential in the fields of education, child rearing, worker productivity, and self-help. In fact, the Marshmallow Test is so famous it's odd that Mischel has only just now gotten around to publishing a book about it, *The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control* (Little, Brown). Perhaps we can chalk it up to the psychologist's own prodigious powers of

self-control.

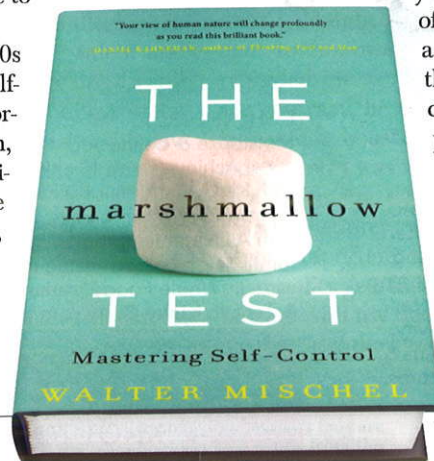
But seriously, in case you don't know: The Marshmallow Test was a study devised by Mischel in the late 1960s to gauge self-control and its merits. He and his colleagues presented four-year-olds with a marshmallow and a deal: If they could wait 15 minutes to eat it—a significant stretch in four-year-old time—they would be rewarded with a second one. Only about a third were able to defer gratification.

Back in the late '60s and '70s, when self-gratification and its correlates (sexual freedom, creativity, and anti-authoritarianism) were aspirational values, self-control was a very square outlier in the psych world. But then came the shoulder-padded, wolf-of-

Wall-Street '80s and '90s, and it was in these decades that the marshmallow kids grew to adulthood, and the gulf between the one-marshmallow group and the two-marshmallow group grew too. The gratification delayers reported higher salaries and greater self-esteem; lower BMIs and incidence of substance abuse and diabetes; more fulfilling relationships; and now, as they near retirement age, more secure 401(k)s. Self-control, far from feeling ungroovy, became a research juggernaut.

Daniel Goleman's 1995 *Emotional Intelligence*, which suggested that the capacity to regulate one's emotions was as essential as intellect, spent a year and a half on the *New York Times*' best-seller list. Studies about the benefits of self-control continue to increase (fivefold between 2000 and 2010, by some accounts), prompting both the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania to open entire labs dedicated to studying such topics as the relationship between delayed gratification and eighth graders' GPAs. Last

year, the University of Chicago published a study suggesting that those with self-control are happier—not just in the long term, but in the short term (i.e., even while they're *waiting* for the marshmallow). Mischel has been profiled in *The New Yorker*, the



Marshmallow Test has been referenced by everyone from Barack Obama to Grover on *Sesame Street*, and we now decree that people with high self-control are thinner, richer, healthier, and happier.

But he who lives by the swinging pendulum of behavioral psychology revises by the pendulum. In the past decade—a time in which the Internet and social media have vastly accelerated the rate at which we must make decisions and even have ideas; in which online flash sales reward impulse buyers; in which achieving overnight start-up success has replaced the Organization Man—a counterargument on the drawbacks to self-control has begun to emerge. For starters: People speaking off-the-cuff are perceived as less prejudiced when discussing race than their more rehearsed counterparts. Or: Mind wandering can promote creative thought. And: Those with low self-control are more likely to give to charity. Or: Impulse purchases of big-ticket items—cars, houses—yield greater customer satisfaction. “At first I thought it was a fluke, but study after study kept emerging,” says Eli J. Finkel, PhD, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University. “Eventually, the consistency of data was just too compelling to discount.” In 2009, Finkel published a study asserting that low-self-control individuals were more likely to exhibit “pro-social” (i.e., accommodating) behavior in romantic relationships. He uses the example of agreeing to go to dinner with a spouse’s annoying friend. “We had assumed the gut reaction would be to do the selfish thing,” Finkel says. “But the person with high self-control may actually overthink it and ultimately say, ‘Fuck that, maybe that’s not so sensible for me.’”

Back to that pendulum.... “One thing that often happens [in psychology],” says Finkel, “is after a topic blows up, people start to tilt their heads and say, ‘Hey, maybe there’s something we missed.’” He notes that this happened with the subject of happiness, when, in the wake of the positive psychology craze, there came a few studies about its relative downsides. (In one from the University of Illinois, college freshmen who identified as “very cheerful” were by their late thirties earning about \$3,500 a year less than their more cynical peers—suggesting that people who don’t experience much dissatisfaction may also be less ambitious.)

Still, talk to Walter Mischel and it’s impossible to discount the many benefits of self-control. When I ask him why he decided to write a book now—he’s 85—he shoots back, “Because I know my future

self well enough to know I ain’t gonna be around much longer.” He credits his mastery of self-control for his quitting a vicious smoking habit; he used to smoke a pipe in the *shower*. Yet he says, “a life without taking the first marshmallow sometimes is a life not worth living. My work doesn’t propose that self-control should be anyone’s way of life. [Impulsivity] can let you feel the joys of life, as well as its dark sides, and tune you into your emotions.” In his book he cites a 2013 Columbia University study that found that individuals with high self-control suffered from an “illusion of control,” or a false sense of security caused by long periods of feeling in control. Exhibit A: the Paula Broadwell and General David Petraeus sex scandal. “He’s so used to being in control at all times,” says Mischel, “that he didn’t think twice about putting very sensitive information in an e-mail.”

It’s tempting to discount this point, given that impulsivity is something many take for granted. In a 2011 survey by the American Psychological Association, respondents cited lack of self-control as the number-one impediment to reaching their goals, over factors such as lack of funds and lack of motivation. Almost every person I tell about this story I’m writing—no matter how successful, put-together, physically fit—wails, “I have the *worrrrrst* self-control.” In the course of one of our phone conversations, over a stack of pancakes I ordered in from my local diner (I woke up late), I tell Mischel that I too have the worst self-control.

“Did you go to college?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Did you graduate?” Of course. “Well, then you have at least some self-control.”

I see this as setting the bar pretty low, given that I went to a private high school where college wasn’t an *if* but a *where*, and once I got there, a slapdash paper on *The Faerie Queene* could earn me a respectable B-plus. However, in the course of interviewing Mischel, I do become more aware of ways in which I exhibit self-restraint. I have a habit of buying a Twix bar at the office vending machine, taking one bite, and then rendering it inedible by squirting ketchup all over it—a secret I learned while living in a sorority house, a virtual laboratory of novel ways to exercise self-control while eating. I’d long thought this was a weakness (if I had restraint, I’d be satisfied with just one nibble), yet to my surprise, Mischel approves. “That’s *it*, Amanda,” he says. “You’ve taken the desire totally out of the object.” (My editor, who can’t quite

get the disgusting image out of her head, calls this actually a *creative* way to guard against impulsivity.)

It’s hard to know where all this gets us. For example, Finkel found that those with low self-control are *less* likely to forgive. (Just as our gut is to go with the flow when a partner asks for a favor, it’s to retaliate when we’ve been wronged.) So what’s preferable: a spouse who is willing to go to dinner with your annoying friend but will exact a pound of flesh afterward, or a spouse who *won’t* go to dinner with your annoying friend but will quickly forgive you, or even let you off the hook, when you refuse to go to dinner with *his* annoying friend? Or: If those with low self-control are more likely to give to charity but less likely to have the retirement savings to back it up, what’s better, ultimately? How do you even define *better*? “These are big, philosophical questions,” Finkel says. Gee, Dr. Finkel, thanks a lot.

In August, Daniel J. Levitin, the director of the Laboratory for Music, Cognition, and Expertise at McGill University, wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* that touched on this very dilemma: “The processing capacity of the conscious mind is limited,” and, since the advent of social media, heavily taxed by all the new stuff we put into it every day. “Our brains have two dominant modes of attention.... The task-positive network is active when you’re actively engaged in a task, focused on it, and undistracted; neuroscientists have taken to calling it the central executive. The task-negative network is active when your mind is wandering; this is the daydreaming mode.... This two-part attentional system is one of the crowning achievements of the human brain, and the focus it enables allowed us to harness fire, build the pyramids, discover penicillin, and decode the entire human genome. Those projects required some plain old-fashioned stick-to-itiveness. But the insight that led to them probably came from the daydreaming mode.”

Says Finkel: “If I had to pick, I’d prefer high self-control any day.” Mischel, the modern guru of self-control is more... balanced. “The biggest challenge is to figure out when to wait for marshmallows or when to ring the bell,” he says. “But unless we develop the ability to wait, we won’t have that choice [in the first place].... You can be creative enough to have the idea for the book. But you still need the self-control to sit there and actually do it.” ●