

# One now, or two later?

*How would you perform on “the marshmallow test”?*

*And what would this mean about your success in career and life?*

A famous Stanford University study reveals the answer to the second question.

In a test environment, children were sat in a room and offered a marshmallow. They were then given two options - they could eat the marshmallow straight away or, if they were willing to wait while the researcher stepped out for 15 minutes, have two marshmallows. Then the kids were left alone with their first marshmallow on a plate in front of them.

A few ate it straight away. Others stared longingly, bolting it down soon after. Most who struggled to resist held out for only minutes, but about 30% wrestled with the temptation and successfully waited until the researcher returned.

What had enabled this self-control? Walter Mischel, psychology professor at Stanford, concluded that the crucial skill was the “strategic allocation of attention”. Instead of getting obsessed with the marshmallow and how delicious it would be, they typically distracted themselves – covering their eyes, pretending to play hide-and-seek under the desk, or singing.

The research team drew initial conclusions that the successful kids temporarily set their desire aside by avoiding thinking about the marshmallow. The kids who couldn't delay often had the “attention” rules reversed, staring at the marshmallow, but with the unwanted result of eating sooner rather than later.

The more significant findings came over a decade later when Mischel found that the children who'd held out for the bigger reward were more successful long term than those who'd downed their marshmallow quickly.

The “low delayers” (immediate eaters) were more likely to have behavioural problems, difficulty in stressful situations, and difficulty maintaining relationships. They had less ability to focus and lower Scholastic Aptitude test scores. Once into their thirties, they tended to develop a significantly higher body-mass index and were more likely to have had problems with drugs.



The marshmallow task is a powerful predictor of later success because it captures our ability to deal with “hot emotions”. And if we can do this in relation to marshmallows as a kid, we're more likely to build positive habits like eating well instead of overloading

with junk food, exercising regularly, and investing or saving rather than spending excessively on credit. In relation to school and career, we'd study instead of watching television, train or go to university instead of taking any job just for the immediate cash, and apply ourselves in even menial junior

roles knowing our rewards would come later.

There are also “marshmallow factors” regarding job satisfaction. If you were dissatisfied with your job, would you accept just about any alternative, or set about identifying how to improve your situation or mapping out your ‘dream job’, and taking the steps needed to make this happen.

If you can put off one reward now for a whole bag of rewards later – delay gratification – you'll take the longer path to higher satisfaction and more sustained success. Combine this with a positive motivation strategy – moving towards a positive goal rather than just opting to leave a difficult situation, and you have a recipe for long-term fulfillment.

If you do want to build your ability to delay gratification, start to stretch out your “gratification timeframe”, particularly where you can swap a short-term smaller gain for a long-term larger gain. Try small things first. Forget about marshmallows, and base your consumption decisions on how healthy you'll be eating fruit instead. Turn off the TV or computer and go for a walk – regularly. Then go bigger. Invest in your own professional development – take on that course you've always been going to do. Start (and complete!) that major project. Demonstrate to your manager that you are in it for the long haul and will take on extra responsibility, knowing you'll benefit as much as your workplace does. Get active in setting up that business if that's your dream.

A good coach – life, career or executive depending on your needs – can help with setting goals, and with the next steps to long-term sustainable success.

Going straight for that marshmallow in front of your nose may not be the best answer!