

ONE MARSHMALLOW OR TWO?

How self-control can make us happy.
By David Servan-Schreiber

TOM IS 4 YEARS OLD AND HIS PARENTS HAVE AGREED TO LET HIM TAKE PART IN A psychological experiment at Stanford University in California. Professor Walter Mischel sits Tom down in front of a pink marshmallow with a little bell beside him. The psychologist says he's going to leave Tom alone for 15 minutes, and if he manages not to eat the marshmallow, Mischel will give him another when he gets back. If Tom can't resist the temptation, he has only to ring the bell. But he won't get the extra one.

A camera records Tom's anxious fidgeting during the professor's absence. The boy starts by twisting around on his chair, then tries looking around the room. When desire takes hold of him again, he starts kicking his legs about; finally, he covers his eyes with his hands. But he doesn't ring the bell. Once the 15 minutes are over, Professor Mischel comes in as promised, congratulates him and gives him the second marshmallow.

A lot of children who took part in the test didn't hold out as well as Tom. Some gave up within the first minute. Others managed a bit longer, going so far as to lick the table around the coveted marshmallow, yet even they gave up before the designated 15 minutes were over.

Professor Mischel's team followed the kids who took part in the experiment for 30 years to see how they turned out. The final results of this study have dramatically altered our modern view about what we need to achieve happiness.

First, little direct link was found between IQ and the ability to resist temptation.



Some of the most "intelligent" children cracked more quickly than others who were possessed of considerably lower IQ scores. The children who stood firm and resisted temptation were better adjusted as adolescents: They had a wider circle of friends, their teachers liked them better, they coped more effectively with stress and they were more articulate.

They ended up with more satisfying jobs, and had significantly fewer problems with alcohol or drugs at the age of 32 than those who, at 4 years old, succumbed to the temptation of a pink marshmallow. It turned out that the better predictor of success as an adult wasn't an intelligence test but the ability to control yourself during the marshmallow test.

This is encouraging news because our IQ is something we're born with, and it's hard to improve on. On the other hand, we can all strengthen our willpower. Yoga and meditation teach us to observe our desires and master them. With practice, this ability extends to everyday life: "I really want another piece of cake, but I can simply note how much I want it, direct my breathing toward the desire and see what happens if I do nothing."

Being congratulated and rewarded for their effort and persistence helps children develop these qualities. As adults, what helps the most is to understand that everyone finds it difficult to

wait for that second marshmallow—but that as time goes by, the more we're able to act as sympathetic observers of our own desires and the easier they become to control.

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