

The Marshmallow Test: Understand Self-Control and How to Master It

Walter Mischel
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Your future in a Marshmallow? What the book of the famous self-control test can tell us about success

In the early 1960s, Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel and his team conducted an experiment to examine self-regulation processes. Pre-schoolers were challenged with a dilemma; individually, in a room, they were given a choice between one marshmallow on the table that they could eat immediately (immediate gratification) or waiting for a better, but delayed reward, and getting two marshmallows (delayed gratification). This experiment is called the Marshmallow Test. What Mischel found with the experiment and its replications, as with the findings from other related research and its implications in real-world scenarios, is what you will read in the pages of the book “The Marshmallow Test- Understand Self-Control and How to Master It”.

Observing the struggles that children experienced in trying to contain themselves, their creativity to resist temptation, and the motivation for the enhanced delayed rewards, Mischel found that children differ in their degree of self-control. He and his colleges continued to follow the group of pre-schoolers for years, and they found that children who had more self-control in preschool and postponed the reward were more successful in high school. He suggests that self-control in early life can be an indicator of success and well-being in the future. These findings led researchers to explore how our ability to control ourselves influences the journey from preschool to retirement planning; furthermore, has many profound implications for the choices we make every day from parenting, education, public policy, major business decisions, weight control, stop smoking, etc....

Mischel brings us to the realisation that we live in a marshmallow test. We grow up, we change the marshmallows for other rewards: money, recognition, prestige, etc. However, the author is not suggesting choices made by a pre-schooler will determine the rest of their life - we all know that real life and human behaviour is more complex than that. The bottom line from these studies is: if you want to improve your chances to succeed at something, self-control can help you to make the tough choices and maintain the effort needed to achieve your goals. The big question is: “can self-control be learned or is it prewired?”

As Daniel Kahneman demonstrated in “Thinking Fast and Slow”, Mischel's book divides behaviour into two systems: hot and cold. The hot system is more impulsive and focuses on immediate rewards and the cold system is the most rational, one capable of playing the long game. How well it works, as he explained, will depend not just on skills but internalising aspirations and values in direction to the goals, but also on motivation that is strong enough to beat the obstacles along the route.

The book is very interesting because it expands upon the initial experiment demystifying willpower as an inborn trait that you either have or don't have; it is possible to develop the ability to delay gratification just as it is possible to develop muscles in the gym. Self-control is not an all-or-nothing character trait, professionals can be excellent at avoiding distractions during working hours but may not be very disciplined with their diet. The author explains no matter how bad you are at self-control “naturally, many researchers have demonstrated the plasticity of our brains and the malleability of human nature”. As Mischel cited in his book, Carol Dweck's research suggests we must think about our abilities and intelligence as malleable skills, skills that we can improve with practice, therefore improve our performance. We often assume that excellence and success require Homeric efforts, that goals in our career, business, or other aspects of life demand enormous doses of willpower and motivation. Mischel reminds us that the reality is, in most cases, that all it takes are small, manageable steps; in business called SMART goals. Failure is repeated bad decisions, it is not just one marshmallow, but hundreds of decisions that are made every single day. Consistency in good habits is the key to going far and is what leads to success. Projects need actions, even if small. Ideas need movement to get off the ground.

The author dedicates two-thirds of the book to explaining the core concept and writes in-depth about years of research, which was quite repetitive. The third part of the book is dedicated to how to use the findings. The author exemplifies tactics used in the study that can help us improve discipline and develop self-control, as some examples:

- 1- Delay gratification system: you can develop a reward system, a coffee break after completing a chore, or if you are a wanderlust like me, five minutes looking at travel destinations after sending a difficult email, or any small treat that can be considered a reward for you.
- 2- If-then plan: if you consciously observe the patterns of not desirable behaviours that consistently happen in your daily life, over time that will lead you to be aware and target the hot spots. Once you know the “if” stimuli and situations that trigger behaviours you want to modify, you are

positioned to change how you appraise and react to them – that becomes your “if-then” plan.

- 3- Your future self: planning for the future because it is too far away, is not an easy task. It is much easier to prioritise immediate rewards over something that may only happen in the long run. The author describes a research that can be used as a tactic for future planning such as retirement: to create an avatar online representing your future self, a projection of what you will look like when you are 70 years old. Your future self is no longer an idea and seeing yourself at 70 makes you reflect on what you will want for yourself when you reach this age. This can help you emotionally get engaged with this future picture of yours, think more clearly to make your decisions today, and make you more likely to stay committed to your resolutions.

Mischel anecdotally demonstrates the power of choice through a narrative of a psychologist who analysed a patient suffering from anxiety; the patient asks, "Am I falling apart?" and the analyst replies: "Would you like to?". This narrative demonstrates that there is a choice, even if subconscious, to allow ourselves to become carried away by our behaviours. It is up to us to make our choices as it is also our responsibility to deal with the consequences. Strengthening self-control is a way of identifying the moments when we make these choices and how we can change our behaviour to achieve our goals. Mischel observed that the self-perception of the children with higher self-control skills was as someone who believed he could do it and acted as the causal agent to the desired outcome. It is an “I think I can” mindset.

Without bias, the author makes us reflect on the question: is delayed gratification better or should we enjoy the moment? The key is equilibrium; in Michel’s words “A life with too much of it can be as unfulfilling as one with too little”. I couldn't agree more, as much as I believe that success depends on hard work and foregoing immediate gratifications for the sake of a greater future reward, I also believe that life without some immediate small joys loses its grace.

To conclude, with decades of compelling research and life examples, the crystal-clear message of the book is that self-control is an acquirable skill that can be mastered and has profound consequences for achieving success. Mischel clearly explains success does not come like a recipe in a cookbook. What leads to success is the combination of reasonable talent, hard work, and the ability to keep going in

the face of defeat or when things get frustrating. Who you are and what you can be is a choice that you make every day in your life. Everybody can find ways to improve self-control, no matter their age. I end this review with the same quote that Mischel made at the end of his book, recalling and modifying Decartes' famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" for "I think, therefore I can change what I am". The Marshmallow Test will change the way you think about who you are and what you can be, so I highly recommend you read this enthralling book.