

**The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control**

by Walter Mischel, PhD. Little, Brown and Company, New York, NY, 2014, 328 pages, \$29.00 (hardcover).

The Marshmallow Test came into broad professional and public awareness in 2006 through a column by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks that described self-control in preschool children. *The Marshmallow Test* intends to demonstrate that self-control, the ability to delay immediate gratification for a future benefit or consequence, is a cognitive skill that is innate in some but can be learned. Research by the author, his collaborators, and others to support the existence of this cognitive skill, its development, and how its presence or absence can profoundly influence an individual's physical and mental health and general welfare is presented in a readily understood narrative. The test's development, implementation, expansion into other areas, and implications for clinical care and public policy are clearly and succinctly elucidated.

The introduction precisely summarizes the book's essence and directs the reader to such critical concepts as the interaction of the "hot" and "cool" systems we as humans use to manage temptation and frustration via "hot" (emotional, unconscious, reflexive) and "cool" (cognitive, slower, effortful, and reflective) facets of our functioning. Other key concepts include the human brain's malleability/plasticity and the roles of motivation, internalized values, goals, and the environment.

The book is divided into 3 parts: part I describes the mental strategies and process that "cool hot temptation, delay gratification, and achieve self-control." The test itself initially conducted in a nursery school 50 years ago involved children, ages 4 or 5, who were instructed to remain in their seats and given the choice of receiving an immediate reward, that is, eating a marshmallow, or earning an enhanced reward, that is, waiting up to 20 minutes for the researcher to return and then receiving 2 marshmallows. The children's responses illustrate a range of coping strategies used to delay gratification and might well provoke *aha* smiles in the reader. The importance of this ability for self-control has been demonstrated by a series of follow-up assessments. Those children demonstrating this cognitive skill early on were generally more successful in several critical areas later in life: in adolescence, those who delayed their action more as preschoolers had better cognitive and social functioning; likewise, at ages 27–32, those delaying the longest had a better sense of self-worth, functioned at higher levels, and had lower body mass index, and by midlife, those delaying the longest had distinctly different brain scans in regions often associated with "willpower."

A chapter in part I titled "The Best Laid Plans" demonstrates the author's superb ability to communicate. Citing the strategy used by Homer's Odysseus to deal with the Sirens, he describes how teaching preschool children "if-then planning" mightily aids them in resisting temptation in highly seductive situations. In later chapters, related research based on the insights gained from the

Marshmallow Test and a series of studies that followed documents the ability of children and adults, including those with significant psychological disorders, to successfully use self-control skills amid distractions and intrusive temptations by "taking the effort out of effortful control." As expected, neuroimaging results are described that pinpoint the limbic area for the hot, unconscious system and the left prefrontal cortex for the cool, reflective, cognitive system in evaluation of immediate versus delayed gratification.

Part II informs the reader about both the benefits of self-control and the downside when its excessive presence limits the quality of life. The focus is on strategies to help the individual develop self-control through its more automatic and less effortful use in making consequential decisions as well as in optimizing one's potential, managing distracting temptations, and addressing exigencies leading to depression and lack of satisfaction. Executive functioning (EF) is presented as part of the cool system. The significant role of the environment in EF skill development and perceived self-control is considered, with several scenarios employed to illustrate key factors in the development and relevance of self-control, such as how a person's personal theory concerning the extent to which they can learn, change, and control affects their functioning. Self-distancing, or reappraisal from a distance, "like a fly on the wall," is depicted as an effective strategy when dealing with a painful experience by allowing the person to develop a more objective perspective and thus reduce negative emotions while providing insight and closure. This strategy is one of many the book provides for therapists to apply in practice.

The relatively short part III expounds on the implications of self-control from a public policy perspective by building on all the positive potential of the human brain's plasticity, the major impact of the environment, the importance of early childhood education, and, most importantly, that self-control skills can be learned throughout the life cycle. However, Mischel explains that well-developed EF and grit, that is, motivation to sustain effort, are critical to the development of self-control and gratification delay.

This review considers only a few of the numerous insights the book presents about developing self-control, which is a therapeutic objective particularly in child psychiatric practice and represents a significant portion of therapeutic effort. *The Marshmallow Test* provides a wealth of useful information and is well worth reading and rereading. It is highly informative, entertaining, and relevant to a broad population of readers. You can confidently recommend it to patients, parents, counselors, and therapists.

Theodore A. Petti, MD, MPH  
pettita@ubhc.rutgers.edu

**Author affiliation:** Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Piscataway, New Jersey.

**Potential conflicts of interest:** None reported.

*J Clin Psychiatry* 2015;76(11):e1478  
dx.doi.org/10.4088/JCP.15bk10118

© Copyright 2015 Physicians Postgraduate Press, Inc.