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Too Many Goals

Social Distancing Is a Marshmallow Experiment You Didn't Sign Up For

How research on self-control can guide us during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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If you've taken a psychology class, you've probably come across the [marshmallow experiment](#) first performed by Walter Mischel and colleagues. Adorable pre-school kids were sat down in front of a marshmallow and told by an experimenter: If you don't eat this marshmallow, when I come back, you can have two. The researchers left the kids alone in the room with the marshmallow and videotaped what they did to try to wait for the marshmallow.

That study taught us a lot about [self-control](#), delay of gratification, and [personality](#) differences. And if its lessons have ever mattered, I think they matter

today.

Because what we are being asked to do is remarkably like what those preschool kids did.

How? Let me break it down.

We are being told by an authority figure: "Stay home. Stop going out. Stop hugging people (that one has been really hard for me). It's going to matter later."

Like the kids in the marshmallow study, we've got to trust these authority figures to behave. And we've got a promise of a reward sometime in the future. The reward is a long way off and it definitely doesn't feel real. Sure, people are showing us all the curves and the graphs and really ALL.THE.THINGS. But what the facts, figures, and even super scary stories of bad things happening don't do is change how we feel about the marshmallow sitting right in front of us. Like the kids in the study, we must have some faith in an abstract thing while there is something else we want to do right in front of our faces. We have to wait, we have to be patient, and we have to do all of that while the strong desire to eat the marshmallow (i.e., go out and live like normal) is right in front of us, tempting us with its sweet fluffiness.

I've got some (more) bad news for you—we're only at the beginning of the study. In the version of the marshmallow study we are in, the experimenter has just left the room. The last 10-14 days have probably felt like the longest of your life. That's no surprise—when we have strong urges to change our behavior—to indulge—time passes more slowly.[1,2]

The kids had to wait for 5 minutes for their second marshmallow. By the looks of the disease trends, we may be at the equivalent of 30 seconds into our delay-of-gratification test. And it's going to start feeling *real* difficult to keep waiting. We won't see the fruits of our labor until the end of our distancing (and, indeed, if changing our

So what now? This is where my mom (someone I am social distancing for) would say to me, "Hold your horses." What were the things your parents, teachers, and loved ones said to you when you were young? They taught us to delay gratification without us even knowing it and it's time to put those lessons into place. A sense of urgency is going to try to make us do and think silly things. It does not feel OK now to be still waiting. We've been waiting and we want to eat that darn marshmallow and move on. It's not time yet.

One of the cruelest things that happens when people face self-control challenges is that our minds start playing tricks on us[3]. We might start feeling like what we're doing won't really matter (that would be like thinking two marshmallows aren't really better than one). And, even worse, it's going to start feeling like other people don't care as much. We will start thinking we've done enough already so that we can take a break now[4], or that since other people are taking a break, we deserve one, too.

Hold your horses, folks. This is your mind playing tricks on you. Just like the kids in the marshmallow study, we've got to do a better job of not focusing on the temptation right in front of us. The kids who did the worst—who just popped that first marshmallow in their mouth—focused only on the temptation itself. They picked it up, they sniffed it, they even licked it. We've got to be like the kids who did better in the study, who earned the eventual reward. These kids sang songs to distract themselves and they used their imagination to think of the marshmallow as a puffy cloud.

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We can turn an eye away from the difficulty and challenge of the things we are being asked to do and keep a focus on the abstract and long-term values they represent. We are behaving in kind and compassionate ways.

No matter what strategies you're using to get through this, things are going to feel incredibly uncomfortable and uncertain. Feeling bored and uncertain will incite us to have a sense of urgency that we must act *now*. This is another trick your mind is playing on you. Urgency plays funny tricks on us, getting us to think we that we have fewer choices than we really do. You've probably heard some politicians or friends saying they'd rather die than have an America that looks like this. That may be their mind playing tricks on them—their sense of urgency making them feel like there are only two options, that this is an all-or-nothing game. But there are more than two options: We can have an America that we know and love *and* protect some of our most vulnerable citizens at the same time.

So what does an expert on self-control have to say in the middle of a public health crisis?

This will pass. It may take longer than the five minutes the kids in the marshmallow study were asked to wait. It may take weeks or even months. This is the time to think back on the lessons we've been taught by the loved ones we are most trying to save. Be patient, be still, be OK with not knowing how things will turn out.

And hold your horses.

References

1. Sayette et al., (2005). Effects of smoking urge on temporal cognition. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 19, 88-93
2. Vohs & Schmeichel (2003). Self-regulation and the extended now: Controlling the self alters the subjective experience of time. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 217-230.