



How to Master Delayed Gratification to Control Your Impulses

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Right now, you could eat a donut, book a trip to Tahiti, and tell your boss to buzz off. However, you don't do these things because at some level, you understand the value of self-control and delayed gratification.

Delayed gratification means saying “no” to something you want in the moment in exchange for a greater benefit or reward later. It involves putting off pleasure, especially when indulging in that pleasure would have adverse consequences down the road.

But how do experts define “delayed gratification,” and more importantly, how can you use it to improve your self-control and become more productive?

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What Is Delayed Gratification?

Encyclopedia Britannica defines “delay of gratification” as:^[1]

“the act of resisting an impulse to take an immediately available reward in the hope of obtaining a more-valued reward in the future.”

Let's break that definition into two parts. First, delayed

gratification requires us to resist an immediate urge. Second, it is moderated by beliefs and so requires that we have reason to believe we'll gain something if we do.

Situations that fulfill only a single part of that definition do not call for delayed gratification. There's no reason to resist the impulse to run from an angry tiger, nor is there reason to put off a [momentary pleasure](#) that's adaptive or healthy, such as laughing at a friend's funny story.

The concept of delayed gratification is best known in association with psychologist Walter Mischel's marshmallow test.^[2]

In the 1960s, a Stanford psychologist named Walter Mischel set up an experiment. He placed a marshmallow in front of children between the ages of 3 and 5 before he left the room.

Although they could eat the treat at any time, Mischel's team told the children they'd earn even more treats if they waited to eat the marshmallow until the researchers returned.

What did Mischel discover?

The young children who showed a tendency to delay gratification and wait longer to eat the marshmallow fared better in life. Compared to the kids who ate it right away, they earned better grades in schools, were more likely to go to college, enjoyed greater self-confidence, and were less likely to struggle with drug problems later in life.

You can learn more about that landmark experiments Mischel's team did in this TED Talk with Joachim De Posada:

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That's the power of delayed gratification, but it's not just important for children. Adults who practice delayed gratification are better able to achieve what they want in life.

Examples of Delayed Gratification

In both personal and professional life, delayed gratification is a smart strategy.

Say you're starting a business. You know it's going to be a lot of work, and you have a limited budget. You could hire the best talent now, get the best technology, and rent a sleek office to work out of. Or you could start small, use your existing computer, and set up shop in your basement until you're bringing in enough revenue to cover office rent.

You'll be less stressed if you spend the money upfront. On the

other hand, you know you'll need that money for product development. By practicing delayed gratification, you put yourself in a better position for the future.

However, you don't have to be an entrepreneur to benefit from delayed gratification. For instance, picture what you'll eat for lunch this afternoon: You could go out to your favorite fast-food restaurant, or you could eat that salad you packed for lunch.

Yes, fast food is inexpensive, and yes, you could always eat your salad another day. But dining out adds up, and your salad won't be as fresh if you wait to eat it tomorrow. You also know that you'll feel better this afternoon if you eat vegetables rather than a burger and fries.

The most important step in delayed gratification is thinking through the [consequences of your choices](#). Learn to control your impulses, and you'll be not just healthier and happier, but more productive.

Why Delayed Gratification Is Essential

The ability to delay gratification reveals emotional intelligence, and this can take you a long way in life. As the old quote goes,

“The dictionary is the only place where success comes before work.”

Genuine, lasting success and satisfaction only come as a result of putting in the right kind of work first.

It's easy enough to dream up what you want your life to look and feel like, but it's entirely different to create a mental

framework and then execute when and where you need to.

Benefits of Delayed Gratification

Without question, it's amazing to get something you want immediately. But if this is the case, why should you still practice delayed gratification? Here's a look at its benefits.

It can make you achieve your health goals

One of the best ways you can improve your health is through practicing proper nutrition. However, this can't be achieved in just a day. You need to practice delayed gratification to keep yourself from getting delicious yet unhealthy treats all the time so your body can feel better in the long run.

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It will enable you to acquire new skills

Delaying satisfaction is no easy feat. In the process, you'll feel dissatisfied, and even jealous of other people. However, most skills cannot be learned in a short span of time. When you practice delayed gratification instead of giving up, you can master more skills that will help you in your professional and

personal life.

It sets you up for financial security

What is your ultimate financial goal? Do you want to save up for a house? Or maybe you want to build your emergency fund?

Whatever it is, practicing instant gratification constantly will get you nowhere. When you constantly spend money instead of aligning your financial habits with your goals, you'll end up with money problems.

It can help you at work

Delayed gratification is immensely helpful when it comes to your career. For instance, if you want to get promoted, you can't possibly expect your boss to promote you or give you a raise after doing one good task. It takes months and years of delayed gratification to develop and improve your skills so you can become a good leader.

How to Master Delayed Gratification for Productivity

Delayed gratification is a great way to [optimize your productivity](#), but before you find out how to do this, you first need to understand the concept of delayed gratification more.

To convince yourself to put in a little extra work now for a better outcome down the road, practice the following.

1. Know Your Goals

Without a reason to delay gratification, you'll struggle to do it. Think through which long term goals you want to achieve and what you can do to get there. It could be:

Personal

Have you always wanted to run a marathon? If so, you'll need to train for it. Although it's tempting to sit on your couch and watch television, delayed gratification is what gets you to lace up your sneakers.

Financial

Nearly 90% of Millennials say they would like to own their own home, but two-thirds of them will need to spend two decades saving up for it.^[3] Putting a little money away each month — despite the fact that you'd rather spend it on vacations or dinners out — is a matter of delayed gratification.

Professional

No employer is going to hand you your dream job simply because you want it; you have to work for it. Spending four years going to college, attending tedious seminars, and practicing your craft in your free time are all examples of delayed gratification.

Social

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Friendships are not formed in a minute. If you want more friends or deeper friendships, you'll need to invest in them. Delayed gratification might lead you to take a connection out to lunch, learn more about a shared interest, or volunteer for a cause he or she cares about.

Emotional

When you're frustrated with a family member, you might be tempted to snap at him/her. How do you resist that temptation? Delayed gratification. When you love a person, you owe them your patience.

Spiritual

The big questions of life can only be answered with [self-reflection and study](#). Looking deeply into yourself or reading religious texts can be uncomfortable. The reason you do them anyway is delayed gratification: You know you'll be happier once you build out your belief set.

2. Think Through “What If” Scenarios

Typically, the best decision becomes clear when you look down the road. One of the oldest and best tools for doing this is called a decision tree.^[4] Decision trees allow you to visualize the follow-on effects of each choice. You can see a very basic example of a decision tree below^[5].



Say your car breaks down. Should you repair it, or should you buy a new one? In a decision tree, you might start with cost: Can you make a down payment without taking out a loan? If not, you might decide against buying a new car.

But should you go for a temporary fix, such as adding oil every week to a leaking engine, or a permanent one, like replacing an engine gasket?

Delayed gratification is a good guide at both levels. You put yourself in the best position to save money by not just keeping your car, but also by opting for the less expensive solution.

3. Use Tools to Take Away Temptations

Delayed gratification is particularly important when you have a job to do. Sure, it might be more fun to scroll through Facebook than make that next sales call, but you can't afford to waste your workday.

Technology can get in the way, but it can also keep you on task. You can actually block apps and set limits for yourself. Not only can keeping yourself from accessing Facebook between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. make you more productive, but it can help you enjoy your evening social media time more.

4. Get an Accountability Partner

If you're married, you and your partner probably share your finances. Why not leverage that partnership to make delayed gratification easier?

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Start by setting ground rules. What expenses, exactly, are you worried about? Do you tend to shop for random gadgets when you're stressed?

If so, decide when it's appropriate to purchase gadgets and when it's not. Agree on consequences in case you slip up, and ask your partner to hold you accountable. Perhaps you'll make up for unnecessary purchases by not going out to eat that week.

You can find an [accountability partner](#) in almost any context. At work, you have colleagues. If you go to church, you sit next to someone who can encourage you to attend sermons.

5. Reward Yourself for Following Through

Inherent to delayed gratification is some benefit you earn by doing the hard work upfront. If you struggle with delayed gratification, you can make it easier by giving yourself a little something extra.

You don't have to use time-consuming or monetary rewards. You could simply watch a movie, play an online game, or go on a hike.

Why Is Delayed Gratification So Hard?

When you take Mischel's marshmallow experiment into consideration, it may seem easy to practice delayed gratification and ego control since the only reward involved is a marshmallow.

Unfortunately, this could not be mirrored in all aspects of real life. People love working towards things that are certain, and this is exactly what makes delayed gratification so challenging.

Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that people instinctively seek pleasure to avoid pain so they can satisfy their biological and physical needs.^[6] According to Sigmund Freud, this principle is the driving force behind the id, which is the most basic part of every human being. Considering this, pleasure is vital for survival.

People make thousands of decisions per day. However, it's hard to work towards something where the promised rewards cannot be obtained in 4 weeks, 4 months, or even 40 years.

Additionally, the preferences of people are malleable. What you want to work for today may mean very little for you in a week's time. But although no one is perfect enough to resist all the temptation of instant gratification, the ability to wait and practice impulse control to pursue a long term reward is no doubt an integral part of success.

Final Thoughts

Delayed gratification should not get in the way of self-care. By giving yourself small treats here and there, you can control yourself when it's tempting to indulge in something you know you should not.

Mastering the ability to delay gratification is difficult, but you can do it. Use these tips to put aside temptation, which can make you happier, healthier, and more productive. And when in

doubt, don't eat the marshmallow.

- [How to Have Self-Control and Be the Master of Your Life](#)
- [How to Build Self Discipline to Excel in Life](#)
- [How to Stop Struggling with Instant Gratification and Reach Your Goals](#)

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Reference

- [1] ^ Encyclopedia [Britannica: Delay of Gratification](#)
- [2] ^ Wikipedia: [Stanford marshmallow experiment](#)
- [3] ^ [Inc.: Study Finds 89 Percent of Millennials Want to Own a Home. But 67 Percent Will Have to Wait 20 Years or More to Afford It](#)
- [4] ^ [Harvard Business Review: Decision Trees for Decision Making](#)
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