

# insights

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## I Think, Therefore I Can Control What I Am

– Walter Mischel, PhD

**A lifetime of research on self-control mechanisms, along with the discovery of the plasticity of brain cells, have prompted world renowned psychologist Walter Mischel of Columbia University to propose the above alternative to Descartes' "I Think, Therefore I Am". Dr. Mischel is the creator of the "marshmallow test", one of the most famous experiments in the history of psychology. At Stanford University in the 1960's, Mischel's team presented 4-year-olds with a treat (e.g. marshmallows) and told them that they could either eat one treat immediately, or wait alone in the room for several minutes until the researcher returned, at which point they could have two treats. They were also given a bell to summon the researcher at any point if they could no longer wait. About 30% of the children were able to delay gratification long enough to receive the double treat. Over the course of five decades, Dr. Mischel found that children who were able to delay gratification the longest performed better academically, had better social relationships, earned more money, were healthier and happier, and had fewer negative life outcomes, such as jail time, obesity, and drug use.**

Mischel was fascinated by the strategies that delayers used while waiting – e.g. turning their chairs around, pushing the treat farther away on the table, singing, playing with toys – all aimed at "cooling" down the impulse for an immediate reward in order to get a larger reward later. These observations led to the most compelling findings of his research – that self-control or executive function skills can be learned and developed.

According to Dr. Mischel, the "hot" system of one's brain is emotional, fast, and reflexive. It is heavily biased towards the present, over-valuing immediate rewards while greatly discounting the value of delayed rewards. The "cool" system is cognitive, slow, and reflective, allowing one to push the

immediate reward farther away (in one's mind or spatially) and bring the distant reward closer, thus enabling a continued focus on the task at hand.

Teachers can help students build their self-control muscles:

1. Model self-control. Be predictable in your own behavior – if you make promises, keep them. Clearly articulate and consistently apply rules and consequences.
2. Help students learn to "cool" the present rewards and "heat" up future rewards – "If I work on this now in class, I'll have more free time to talk with friends and play video games later." "If I study for this test now, I'll be able to go to that party on the weekend before the test."
3. As students work independently or in small groups, offer soothing and encouraging statements about persisting through challenges that students can learn and internalize. Normalize anxiety and the ability to tolerate it.
4. Teach "if-then" planning. Keep a journal of your hot spots, i.e. the things that pull you away from your goals. Plan what you will do if confronted with a hot spot. "If my friend texts me while I'm studying, I'll text that I can't talk for one hour." "If I don't feel like going to exercise, I'll call a friend to meet me at the gym."

### Resource:

Mischel, Walter (2014). *The Marshmallow Test, Why Self Control is The Engine of Success*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

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