Identifying with others who control themselves could strengthen your own self-control

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Is self-control something you can acquire, like a new language or a taste for opera? Or is it one of those things you either have or don’t, like fashion sense or a knack for telling a good joke?

Psychologist Walter Mischel’s famous results from the “marshmallow test” seem to suggest self-control is relatively stable and not easily learned. In this test, children sit at a table in an otherwise empty room and are given a choice: They can have one marshmallow right away, or, if they can wait for the experimenter to get more marshmallows from another room, they can have two instead. Most children see this as a no-brainer and opt to wait for two marshmallows.

The real test is waiting. Children are left alone in the room for up to 15 minutes or until they taste the marshmallow. Children vary in how long they can last without sampling the delectable treat in front of them, and it turns out that the longer they wait, the better they will fare later in life – socially, emotionally and academically. Other tests find similar patterns. People who demonstrate more self-control in childhood are, as adults, healthier, wealthier and more law-abiding.

Mischel himself has emphasized that children who showed more self-control used a variety of strategies that could be learned – like distracting themselves by singing and turning away from the marshmallow or distancing themselves from the marshmallow by imagining it as an inedible, fluffy cloud.