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Article Title:

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

Article Author:

Michelle vanDellen, PhD

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Psychology Today

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Some of the most famous research surrounding self-control is the marshmallow task. In it, children were presented with a single marshmallow and told that if they can resist eating it while the researcher is out of the room for five minutes, they will get another one. The kids who were successful were the ones who ignored the marshmallow - they distracted themselves with anything and everything to make sure that they weren't thinking about the treat. The kids who failed gave into temptation - the "I can have a little taste - as a treat" meme is particularly appropriate here. In this article, the author explains just why research about self control is important in regard to COVID. Instead of a researcher, though, it's the CDC and various public health professionals and instead of a marshmallow it's going to the movies or packing, shoulder to shoulder, into a concert venue. Researchers have, time and time again, highlighted just how hard it is to delay gratification. It's our money and we want it NOW! The author even explains just how incompatible our brains can be with these expectations - our priorities go from, "We should stop COVID!" to "We should re-open the economy!", citing that other people are going to hang out in Piedmont Park or not wearing masks at the grocery store. We interpret this as other people not caring about COVID anymore instead of recognizing the reduced risk of infection in outdoor spaces or acknowledging that sometimes we forget our masks at home and only realize as we're pulling into the grocery store parking lot. Thinking about the decades of research regarding self-control can help us be better at resisting the urge to engage in high-risk behavior. After all, this is all just an exercise in self-control. I like that the author pulled in references to research and tying it to practical suggestions that her mother shared with her - it makes it easier to summarize different studies into a single phrase that sticks with you. Reading this makes me feel prepared to discuss COVID with people who have different opinions.