



**WALK
YOUR WAY**
to better

99 WALKS THAT WILL
CHANGE YOUR LIFE

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Exclusive Excerpt: Walk 49:
A Tale of Two Marshmallows

After the incident with the yellow scale that forced me to face the reality of a forty-six-pound weight gain in the winter of my sophomore year of college, I returned to school a week later and began an eight-month journey to get my body back. What in the world does this have to do with marshmallows?

One of the tactics that I employed during those long eight months was the following. If I was craving something junky—be it pizza or ice cream or whatever was not part of my plan to rid myself of that extra forty-six pounds—I would make a deal with myself: If I still wanted it the next day, I would eat it. Sometimes I did, but more often than not, the next day would come and go and I would forget how desperately I had wanted that vanilla swirl ice cream cone.

While this was only part of my informal weight loss plan, it was a key element in my ultimate success. It took me eight months to get back to my pre-college weight and though there was more to it—lots of walking, no more nighttime pizza, no second helpings—I recall my willingness to both delay gratification of something I wanted and forgive myself when I ate the Snickers bar the next day as key elements of my success. There may be more to this willingness and ability to delay gratification. In the late 1960s, a researcher from Stanford University began a series of experiments that have become known as the Marshmallow Study. The premise was fairly simple. A group of young kids (mostly ages four and five) were invited into a room and offered two choices: they could enjoy a single marshmallow treat right away, or they could wait fifteen minutes—with the marshmallow right in front of them—and if they were able to refrain from eating the marshmallow for fifteen minutes, they were given two marshmallows to eat. Denying temptation and delaying gratification for fifteen minutes gave them twice the reward.

Most of the kids fidgeted, struggling to fight temptation and gave in at some point before the fifteen minutes were up. But some kids were able to hold fast, knowing that if they held on just a bit longer, the reward would be worth it. And here's where it got interesting.

The researchers followed these children into their teens and adulthood and discovered that the children who were able to delay gratification, who had the fortitude to resist immediate satisfaction for a “bigger payoff,” performed better than the kids who gave into immediate gratification. They performed better on their SATs, earned more money, reported greater levels of happiness, showed lower levels of depression, and maintained healthier weights throughout their lives. Now, the Marshmallow Test is only part of the puzzle, as the researchers didn't explore the underlying factors of the children's experiences or personalities that enabled some to delay gratification and made others unable to resist. Undoubtedly, there were other factors at play here.

But one thing is clear. The ability, or willingness, to make choices *now* that will lead to your success *then*, is a critical element of your ability to succeed in achieving whatever goals you have set for yourself. I call it “playing the long game” — understanding that what you do today will cause the results you see tomorrow. Keep in mind that sometimes you do need to eat the chocolate swirl ice cream cone.

While there is a lot of experience and psychology underlying an individual’s ability to delay gratification in favor of something you want more, it is a skill that can be nurtured. How you put this into practice in your own life depends on what your goals are and what you are doing that doesn’t align with those goals. But being aware of the choices you make, pausing to ask yourself if the choice you are making now aligns with your more important future goals, and being forgiving when you sometimes (emphasis on sometimes) decide that the satisfaction is worth it are the first steps.

On today’s walk, consider your goals and make a deal with yourself: Next time you want to do something that doesn’t align with your goals, you will wait. If you still want to spend thirty minutes on social media after you’ve read five pages of a book that has the potential to make your life better, you will. And if you still want that ice cream cone tomorrow, go for it. But order a small.

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Walk Your Way to Better is available on Amazon.

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