

## Give thanks, and prosper

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Northeastern psychology professor Dave DeSteno and his team recently showed that cultivating gratitude can promote impulse control. Photo by Brooks Canaday.

It's a classic experiment: Sit a kid in front of a single marshmallow and tell him that if he waits a few minutes to eat it, he can have two. The videos of these experiments are overwhelmingly entertaining: The kids squirm in their seats, hide under the table, and sniff and even lick at the sugary delight. But what's most amazing about the experiments is that the kids who successfully stave off their desire to indulge have better

long-term outcomes. They do better in school, in relationships, and even have better health as adults.

Dozens of studies have shown similar results, according to Northeastern psychology professor David DeSteno. "The human mind clearly devalues future rewards," he said. "At some level that makes sense because you never know if you're going to be here in the future."

But it's also clear that the [human mind](#) does a little too much devaluing of the future, such that it often doesn't make any sense at all. For instance, if I offer you \$50 today or \$100 in six months, the logical thing to do is wait. As DeSteno put it, "It would be quite difficult to find that kind of return on your investment." But people don't usually wait, because denying immediate gratification is hard. It's tough to say no to ice cream or hold off purchasing items on credit.

That's why the old adage—that patience is a virtue—has stuck around so long. From the early English philosophers to present day psychologists, it's been thought the best way to cultivate patience is to combat desire, tamp down the passions, and ignore your emotions. Unsurprisingly, this has led to the notion that we must quell our emotions if we want to be patient.

In a forthcoming paper in the journal *Psychological Science*, DeSteno and his colleagues show that indeed there is another way, one that challenges some of our oldest held beliefs about patience.

"It's our view that humans possess the capacity for emotion because it serves adaptive purposes," DeSteno said. "That doesn't mean that sometimes emotions can't lead you astray. They can, but so can reason."

DeSteno's team wanted to see whether patience could be cultivated through emotional mechanisms instead of willpower. So they looked to

gratitude.

"What does gratitude really do? It usually reminds me that I owe you something back," DeSteno said. "It's an emotion that make us take costs in the moment in return for benefits down the line."

To test whether gratitude really does improve our patience, specifically in the context of financial rewards, his team conducted a simple experiment. They evenly assigned 75 people to one of three conditions. One group had to recall an event that made them feel grateful. The second thought of an event that made them happy. And the final group considered the events of a typical day. Each wrote about the memory for five minutes.

Next the participants answered survey questions designed to help DeSteno's team determine what emotion they were actually experiencing in the moment of the test. As expected, the people who recalled an experience of gratitude were feeling more grateful than the rest and those who recalled a happy moment felt happier.

Finally, the participants were asked to make 27 separate choices about receiving a sum of money now or a larger sum in the future. And just as DeSteno and his team suspected, the group that felt grateful during the experiment required a larger amount of immediate cash than their peers to convince them to forego the larger future value.

DeSteno's team believes this is the first study to show how cultivating an emotion can actually lead to more patience. As such, it opens the door to "easier, less effortful interventions—ones that don't rely on willpower," DeSteno said.

For example, "if people get in a daily practice of doing a gratitude diary, it should buttress their [patience](#) or impulse control during the day," he

explained. "Or when you're faced with a challenging temptation in the moment, rather than solely trying to exert willpower, simply stopping and thinking of something you're grateful for should enhance your ability to make a wiser decision."

Provided by Northeastern University

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