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Shape Up America! Newsletter

This issue of the Shape Up America! newsletter covers July and August. Our next issue will be in September. Enjoy the summer!

Willpower and "Wait" Control

by Barbara J. Moore, PhD

It is no secret that dieters feel frustrated by their efforts to resist overeating, and it is well known that even successful diet attempts are usually followed by overeating and weight regain. Recent research attributes the obesity epidemic in the US to overeating rather than a decline in physical activity, and data show that Americans are consuming more calories today than they did in the 1970s.¹ A majority of overweight adults struggle to control what they eat, especially when hungry.² Surrounded by an abundance of tasty and affordable high calorie foods, how can we possibly resist overeating? What exactly is willpower and how can it be harnessed to insure effective weight management?

Surprisingly, according to Dr. Walter Mischel, a psychologist at Columbia University, willpower may have nothing to do with a force of will — a painful or uncomfortable insistence on denying yourself pleasurable foods. According to Mischel, willpower can be thought of as a skill of self-distraction that can be learned and that allows you to successfully navigate your hot emotional response to tempting foods. Curiously, what he has learned about willpower was based on studies of 4-year-olds!

Delaying gratification has its rewards

In the late 1960s, Mischel studied hundreds of very young children to measure their willingness to delay gratification — specifically, postpone eating a tasty treat.³ The protocol used to study each child was unvarying: offer a tray of tempting treats, ask the child to select one, ask the child to "wait a few minutes" before consuming it and promise a second treat if the child succeeds in waiting for the researcher to return. While the researcher was out of the room, each child was observed in order to document the behavior while left alone with the treat. Here is a description of how the children struggled:

*"Some cover their eyes with their hands or turn around so that they can't see the tray. Others start kicking the desk, or tug on their pigtails...One child...looks carefully around the room to make sure that nobody can see him. Then he picks up an Oreo, delicately twists it apart, and licks off the white cream filling before returning the cookie to the tray, a satisfied look on his face."*⁴

The unique contribution of this research is that Mischel has been following these children for more than 30 years. In 1981, he contacted the families, teachers and

academic advisers of 652 children he had studied and learned that the long delayers (those who waited the full 15 minutes to eat the treat) had SAT scores that were 210 points higher than those who waited only 30 seconds or less.⁴ The short delay group had lower academic achievement and more behavioral problems, including drug problems.³ Unpublished research by Ozlem Ayduk, an associate of Mischel, suggests that the children with short delay times also had a higher body mass index or BMI (i.e., they were fatter).⁴

By far the most interesting group was the group of children with short delay times who grew up to be long-delaying high achievers. The success of this group suggests that delaying gratification or the exercise of willpower is actually a skill that can be *learned*. This raises the interesting possibility that as adults, we can learn a skill that is of central value in weight management — controlling the consumption of tempting foods.

What's the Secret?

According to Mischel, the children who delayed eating their treat were able to distract their attention away from the tasty food. The self-distraction techniques were varied. Some busied themselves with toys or games; some turned their back on the food; others pretended it was not real or did whatever they could to not see and then forget about the treat — a version of "out of sight, out of mind." Mischel says these children learned how to make waiting "second nature" and worthwhile. In other words, waiting or accepting a delay in gratification is a skill that can be practiced on a daily basis until it finally becomes a habit.

These interesting studies suggest that we can learn how to manage tempting foods so that they don't defeat our efforts to control food intake. This is not a new concept. Techniques to modify eating behavior have been formulated by others and used since the 1960s to assist dieters.^{5,6} For lasting or long-term weight loss success, the idea is to turn these mental tricks and tactics into *habits*. Here's how:

- **Remove temptation from sight.** Change your immediate environment by ridding your home and kitchen of tempting foods. Avoid TV food advertisements by turning off the TV. The key is to avoid looking at tempting foods you are trying to avoid.
- **Establish daily rituals that force you to practice the delay of gratification on a daily basis.** Examples include preparing a meal without snacking, putting away meal leftovers without eating them, and not eating dessert. The goal is to practice the delay of gratification until it becomes habitual.
- **If you are in a situation where you cannot remove tempting foods, use your imagination to strip the foods of their appeal.** At a party where tempting foods are being served, imagine that the food is poisonous or dirty so that it is completely unappealing. Then distract yourself by engaging in a conversation with someone, so you will forget about the food.
- **Divert yourself from thinking about food by engaging in a pleasant task that occupies your hands.** Examples include knitting, sewing, carpentry, or having a good book handy for reading daily.
- **Make delaying gratification of food worthwhile.** Devise a non-food reward that you will give yourself after six days of successful practice of these rituals, then six weeks, then six months, and so on.

Of course, you must decide for yourself if you have made it a habit and if it was worth the effort of training yourself.

In summary, willpower is developing mental tricks and tactics that allow you to control a challenging situation. You can change your environment by ridding your home of tempting foods. But inevitably, you encounter temptation in restaurants and shops or in other people's homes. So when faced with a challenge, willpower boils down to learning how to divert your attention away from the tempting foods and onto something else that is important or enjoyable for you. This is something you can learn and practice. If you can make it worth your while, you can turn it into a satisfying daily ritual that eventually becomes a habit.

Barbara J. Moore, PhD, is President and CEO of Shape Up America!

[References](#)

Fun in the Summer: Kid-Friendly Tips for Physical Activity

by **Kathy Ermler, EdD, Joella Mehrhof, EdD, and Sheri Beeler, EdD**



Vacationing and traveling with children can be a family time full of fun and adventure. However, often confined to smaller spaces (e.g., cars, planes, trains), travel for adults and children can also become a frustrating and energy-consuming venture. Children can quickly become bored, restless and agitated due to their need for physical movement to release pent-up energy. With just a little preplanning, it is possible to keep your children happy and allow for their need to move. The [National Association for Sport and Physical Education](#) (NASPE) recommends that infants, children and youth get a minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

Airline Travel

Creating an airline activity travel kit will assist in helping children pass the time in both the airport and the plane. Here are a few things to include:

- Playing cards can be done in a very quiet way or they can be used to increase physical activity. For example, the game "War" can be played the normal way or the children can turn over cards while holding a push-up position in the airport.
- Yo-yos are small and easy to store. They improve hand-eye coordination and cause little disruption.
- A plain piece of white paper can be used to make [a "Fortune Teller" paper-folding game](#) to play in the airport. Instead of writing numbers in the middle, write physical activities your child can perform (e.g., jumping jacks, sit-ups, hopping, stretching).

Car Travel

Every parent knows the refrain, "Are we almost there?" A car travel kit can also provide opportunities for energy release and muscle stimulation. This kit should contain items that can be used both in the car and when rest stops are made along the route:

- A jump rope can be a life saver at rest stops, and helps children participate in some vigorous physical activity for short durations.
- During those frequent rest stops or at hotels, chalk and a bouncing ball can allow the children the options of a two/four square game or hopscotch.
- The quarter game is a low level activity that stimulates movement while the children are still restrained in the seat belts. Call out a single activity (e.g., make a fist, flap arms like wings, point/flex the feet). The children do the activity 25 times.
- Opposable Thumbs! - All humans have them! Thumb wrestling can be a great activity for a car when the children crave some movement.
- If your family is taking a long car trip, be sure to choose a motel with a swimming pool. Swimming is a great way for you and your children to forget about sitting all day in a car.

Home-Based Vacations

Staying home does not have to be boring or an excuse to watch TV all day:

- Children love nothing more than running through a sprinkler on a hot day or sliding down a hill on a slip and slide. Hours will quickly pass with this water invention.
- Hiking/walking to local sites encourages family fitness and togetherness. Plan a trip to a local historical site, then discuss the favorite aspects of the adventure on the walk home.
- A bike scavenger hunt can provide your children with physical activity while using their skills to locate required objects. Give your children a list of 10 things they need to collect from around your local area. Invite the neighborhood children. Make it a challenge between two or three teams of children.

Day Trips and Weekend Vacations

These fun ideas are good for a single day trip or a weekend getaway:

- Plan a weekend of outdoor activities that include horseback riding, swimming, hiking, bike riding, fishing, canoeing, whitewater rafting, or camping.
- Visit a theme park or a zoo close to your home and you will become a champion. Children love the rides and animals, and everyone gets a lot of physical activity walking from attraction to attraction.
- Plan a trip to a beach or lake. Your children can build sandcastles, dig some sand ditches and collect shells.

Summer is a great time to reconnect with your children and other family members while you are keeping them active and motivated. It just takes a little planning to have a safe and physically active summer.

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Childhood Obesity as a Morality Tale

A book review by Barbara J. Moore, PhD

Big Blue by Vanita Oelschlager is a children's book that tackles the sensitive subject of childhood obesity.

Big Blue is the story of a mountain blue bird who starts out happy but gets lazy and just lies around eating and sleeping. His feelings are hurt one day when another bird calls him "Big Blue" (but what could he do?) Too fat to migrate when winter comes and abandoned by his friends and family, he struggles to survive the winter alone. But chastened by the experience, he changes his ways and was able to migrate the following year. The moral of the story is summarized at the end of the book:

You can play and have fun,
But there's much more to do.
Don't sit and eat snacks
All the day long,
But balance your day.
Have fun and be strong.

The book provides an interesting tale of a blue bird who gets lazy, gets fat, suffers, gets thin and wins. The blue bird as a reformed individual is industrious and a leader. But the book is, of course, very simple, and obesity is not simple. The story does not explore the sadness in human life of being targeted and ridiculed and it does not deal with the pain of living in a dysfunctional family where you are surrounded by people who make bad choices, or suffer from depression, chronic stress or economic deprivation. The family and community in which this particular blue bird lives is healthy and sound. In other words, all of the other blue birds surrounding Big Blue were healthy and high functioning. Too often that is not the case for human blue birds. Still, I did like the book and feel that any parents who want to initiate a sensitive discussion with their child about these issues could use the book for that purpose.

Big Blue is nicely illustrated by Kristin Blackwood and published by [VanitaBooks, LLC](#). It is intended for children ages 4-8.

My Story

Violet found the Shape Up America! Web site to be a great help in her efforts to lose weight, be fit and stay motivated. SUA wishes you well with your continued success! I started my exercise program approximately 6 weeks ago. My weight had gotten up to 240 pounds, the heaviest I have ever been in my life. I felt fatigued all the time, and basically had no energy. I realized I had to do something about it. I had tried every fad diet there is. And this time I wanted to do it right. I joined a Boot Camp fitness program along with using this site to help me with tips as well as motivational resources. In six weeks I have lost 13 pounds and have gained a renewed sense of vitality. The Shape Up America! Web site has provided me with a lot of useful information and is very user-friendly.

Editor's note: The [Shape Up America!](#) (SUA) Web site offers helpful tips and guidance to assist with your weight control efforts. Resources include the [SUA Cyberkitchen](#); [Get Up and Go! 10,000 Steps a Day](#); [Portion Control tutorial](#); and [SUA Story](#). *Shape Up America! wants to hear about you!* If you would like to share your personal success story and be an inspiration to others who desire to lose weight, simply use our [story submission system](#) on the SUA Web site.

Menus for Weight Loss and Healthy Eating

Shape Up America! offers these simple, convenient [1500 calorie](#) and [2000 calorie](#) menus to help you eat healthfully while controlling your calories.

Recipe of the Month

This colorful salad includes some of the ingredients typically found in salsa.

Mango, Cucumber and Red Pepper Salad

Makes 4 servings, 1 cup per serving



INGREDIENTS:

- 2 Tbsp. fresh lime juice
- 2 Tbsp. orange juice
- 2 tsp. brown sugar
- 1/8 tsp. red pepper flakes
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- Ground black pepper
- 2 Persian or 8-inch piece seedless cucumber, peeled and cut in 1/4-inch slices
- 1 small red bell pepper, seeded and cut into 3/8-inch strips
- 1 ripe medium mango
- 8 red lettuce leaves
- 1/4 cup lightly packed spearmint leaves
- 1/4 cup dry-roasted peanuts, chopped

DIRECTIONS:

1. In medium mixing bowl, combine lime and orange juices with sugar, red pepper flakes, salt and a few grinds black pepper. Add cucumber and red pepper.
2. For mango, cut thin slice off stem and pointed ends. Using a swivel-bladed vegetable peeler or sharp paring knife, remove peel in strips, working from one cut end of fruit to the other. Cut flesh away from both sides of the pit, making two large domes. (Any flesh remaining on the pit is the cook's portion.) Cut each mango half lengthwise into 1/4-inch strips and add to mixing bowl.
3. Toss with fork to combine salad, then set aside for 20-30 minutes to allow ingredients to marinate in the dressing.
4. To serve, line four salad plates with lettuce leaves. Mound one-fourth of salad onto each plate. Sprinkle on mint and peanuts. Serve immediately.

Nutritional analysis per serving: 120 calories, 5 grams total fat, 0.5 grams saturated fat, 17 grams carbohydrate, 4 grams protein, 3 grams dietary fiber, 300 milligrams sodium if use unsalted peanuts; 360 milligrams sodium if use salted peanuts.

Source: [American Institute for Cancer Research](#)

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