

wait for it

In a world of instant gratification, patience is a lost art. But can you develop a muscle for it? And is there any hope for your kids? Hold your horses—it's all here.

Remember when getting directions to Grandma's required actually talking to Grandma? No matter how long that took? And how about when new shoes required a trip to the mall instead of a click of a mouse (with free two-day shipping)? Sure, tasks and errands were more time-consuming back then, but they also carried a silver lining: They helped to cultivate patience.

For obvious reasons, the character trait is on the decline. (Face it: Patience is on the endangered species list as far as virtues go.) With entire seasons of TV shows available at once on Netflix and burning questions resolved in seconds, thanks to ever present smartphones, Americans have entered an era of hyperconnectivity, according to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center. Among its negative effects:



"a need for instant gratification and a loss of patience," notes the report. A study conducted by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 2012 found that roughly a quarter of Internet users abandon an online video if it takes more than five seconds to load, and half jump ship after 10 seconds. Our ability to wait isn't much better in other segments of our lives. Just sit in a traffic jam for a few minutes and count how many honking horns you hear.

why patience matters

Other than keeping you from huffing like a gorilla when the office elevator stops at every floor? Mastering patience—and showing self-control, a quality that's in the same immediate family—makes you a more

engaged, confident, and even healthier member of society. A 2004 study published in *The Journal of Personality* found that the capacity to exercise self-control correlates with high self-esteem, better grades, and better interpersonal skills.

Consider the often cited Stanford "marshmallow experiment," which psychologist Walter Mischel first conducted about 40 years ago. In the experiment, four-year-olds were offered one marshmallow (or another similarly alluring treat) immediately or two if they could wait about 25 minutes for the researchers to come back into the room. When the original participants were revisited recently, scientists discovered that those who had been able to put off gratification in favor of a superior reward as four-year-olds had grown up to be more patient adults. "They also had higher SAT scores, lower body mass indexes, and a slightly lower divorce rate," says

BJ Casey, Ph.D., the director of the Sackler Institute for Developmental Psychobiology at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University, in New York City, and one of the authors of the follow-up study of the experiment.

What's more, people who are patient are, to put it bluntly, more likable. They're better at waiting their turn, not interrupting while others are talking, and not making a scene at the DMV. In short, "they're easier to be with," says Rona Renner, a registered nurse and the author of the parenting book *Is That Me Yelling?* "Patience enables you to work collaboratively, have good relationships with others, and move toward goals."

born vs. bred

In adults and children, the development of patience involves both nature and nurture. The biological roots of impatience include an overcharged fight-or-flight reflex, which kicks in as a survival mechanism during stressful situations (you know, when you're running 10 minutes late); anxiety or depression; and feelings of superiority or entitlement. "This is the sense that you should be able to go ahead of someone or that your needs should be put first in any situation," says Judith Orloff, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles and the author of *The Ecstasy of Surrender*. "You get pushy and think that you have more rights than others." For children, who can seem like the least patient species on the planet, brain development also plays a role. "The prefrontal

circuitry of the brain, which involved in self-regulation, developing into our 20s," this contributes to children teenagers' being more impulsive, says Casey.

The nurture component is key, too. For example, an overflow of obligations leaves many adults "overwhelmed, overcommitted and feeling if they don't have enough to do everything," which makes them less likely to handle things with a smile, says Orloff. A for children, they "learn by what they see rather than by what you say," says Renner, so if you have a short fuse, your kid might, too. One of the best ways to raise a kid who will wait is that second marshmallow is to become good at waiting yourself. "Some children are more naturally patient, but patience is something that absolutely can be cultivated," says Renner. In fact, with a little know-how and effort, even in your family can learn to wait out delays, big and small.

changing your temperament

"Many people speak about patience as if it were some commodity," says Allan the founder of the Community Meditation Center, in New York City, and the author of *Peaceful Living: The Art of Peaceful Living*. "I'm running out of patience" or "I'm losing my patience" that's not really accurate. Patience and impatience are feelings. In other words, you start the day with a full tank that's steadily depleted as kids take 45 minutes to finish their shoes. M.J. Ryan, an active coach and the author of *The Power of Patience*, says the trait is a mixture of "patience, acceptance, and calmness." When people with these t



qualities find that something is not going their way, they can keep on keeping on." How do you get that magic mix if you weren't born with it? By adjusting your wiring. "The brain is constantly being refined by our experiences," says Casey. "If you train yourself to regulate your behavior and work on cooling off before responding, you can actually alter your brain circuitry." Here's how.

set up cues

The human psyche functions much the way a computer does: It's fastest at retrieving the information that it used recently. To access patience more easily, Lokos recommends choosing an activity that you perform frequently throughout the day (taking a sip of water, touching a door handle, turning a page) and thinking of the word *patience* every time you do it. (If you find yourself forgetting about this as the day wears on, simply resume the practice as soon as you remember.) Continue every day for a week, says Lokos, "and you'll start to notice that you're handling situations differently than you would have before."

imagine success

There's no need to wait until you're in the field (say, the grocery checkout line with a trainee on the register) to test yourself. "Visualize a situation that would normally challenge you," says Lori Lite, a parenting expert and the author of *Stress Free Kids*. "See yourself smiling and breathing as you wait for the line to move, and add some positive statements." For example: "I will enjoy this *People* magazine

while I wait." Doesn't sound like you? No matter. Your mind will process the pretend scenario as a real experience in which you did the right thing, helping to set you up for future successes. Hey, an imaginary win is still a win.

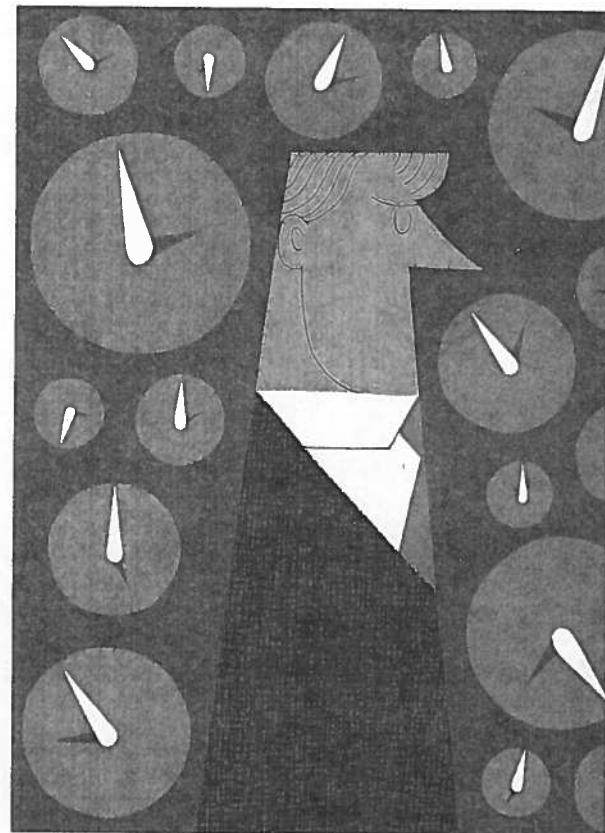
meditate

"People who meditate say that they feel more peaceful, accepting, and content," says Lite. And a 2011 brain-imaging study conducted at Yale University found that people who meditate regularly can switch off parts of the brain that are associated with anxiety. An easy technique that you can try anywhere: Close your eyes and imagine filling your mind with your favorite color, says Lite. Let the color drown out the voice that is thinking about yesterday or tomorrow.

Children can benefit from centering time-outs, too. For them, Orloff recommends three-minute meditation intervals. "Ask them to take a few deep breaths, relax their bodies, and picture an image that makes them happy, such as playing with their friends or riding a skateboard," says Orloff. "This will teach them to calm down and focus on something positive, which in turn helps them learn to center themselves quickly throughout the day," including when they're waiting for that pasta to heat up or their brother to give up the iPad.

slow down

Racing to and fro might seem like the only way to get the whole family where they need to be on time, and as a result this has become your default setting. "We get so caught up in hurrying that we get stuck in that mode," says Lite. "But most adults do not feel happy when they're rushing, and children are even less capable of doing it with a good attitude." Instead of



sweating through your routine, turn on some soothing background tunes and move at a normal pace. If you're legitimately running late all the time, rethink your schedule. You probably need to allot a few more minutes for each errand—or consider dropping some from your to-do list. It also helps to "get up 10 minutes earlier," says Renner. "If you can have a coffee and shower before dealing with the kids, you'll function much better."

learn to distract yourself

The ability to let your mind wander, whether through daydreaming or actively applying your imagination, is a skill that bolsters patience. For example,

in the marshmallow experiment, many of the subjects who followed instructions to ignore the sweets as something like floating clouds, which their minds off the wait. Encourage your kids to make stories in their heads or to imagine the place that they're in as somehow different; eventually they'll get into the habit of doing this on their own. As for you, something as simple as moving a pebble from one pocket to the other may be enough to wrest your mind from aggravation, says Ryan. And when all else fails and you're out the iPhone, don't beat yourself up, even if you have to give your kids your phone or tablet sometimes, but it is important for children to learn non-electronic methods of shifting their attention," says Renner.

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quick fixes

You can't turn into a different person overnight or even over a year. But while you're working on things, you *can* employ strategies to avoid blowing your top.

breathe deeply

It's the oldest trick in the book, and that's because it works. If you feel tension mounting, drop your shoulders (eyes closed, if you want) and take a series of deep breaths. "The stress response and the relaxation response are opposite, so they can't be on at the same time," says Ryan. Kids can do this, too. When your little one gets annoyed that a favorite app won't load, tell him to "close his eyes and imagine he's a sea otter sitting on a rock, waiting for other sea otters to join him," says Lite (who is also the author of *Sea Otter Cove*, a children's book about relaxation). Then tell him to "breathe in—two, three, four—and out, two, three, four." This is something that you can go back to again and again with your kids. ("Let's do our sea-otter breathing.")

use calming self-talk

You have an important meeting starting soon and the guy behind the deli counter making your lunch appears to be the slowest sandwich crafter on the planet. Panic ensues. "Typically there's a triggering thought, like *I'm going to get in trouble*, that sets you off," says Ryan. Before you go down an emotional rabbit hole, hit pause and take

yourself through a series of questions, such as "What is the worst that can happen if I miss the meeting? Can I survive the worst?" Then, says Ryan, figure out if there is anything you can do to help the scenario, like sending a text that you'll be a few minutes late or cutting your losses and leaving the deli.

suggest a game

If your children haven't yet mastered the art of distracting themselves, give them a prompt. On the checkout line, try a game, like "How many hats do you see?" says Deborah Gilboa, a family physician and the author of the upcoming book *Get the Behavior You Want... Without Being the Parent You Hate!* With older kids, you could ask, "Can you list all the jobs that people have to do where we are now?" (Restocking, slicing meat, carting fruit...)

stick a Post-it next to the phone

But not just any Post-it. On this one, you need to write, "Am I about to speak as the person I want to be?" It's a question that often goes by the wayside in the thick of our daily interactions, says Lokos. Every time you get on the phone with customer service (the cable company, your health insurance), read the note as a reminder. It might stop you from taking out your frustration on the agent who answers the call.



the marshmallow experiment, revealed

Real Simple's staff health editor, Julia Edelstein, participated in a later study similar to the marshmallow experiment when she was a toddler. Read her account at realsimple.com/experiment.

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