Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman is discussing his famous "impulse control" test at a San Francisco lecture and has the entire audience's attention. Goleman is the author of *Emotional Intelligence*, a fascinating book about discoveries in brain research that prove emotional stability is more important than IQ in determining an individual's success.

One of the highlights is a test administered more than 40 years ago that Goleman calls "The Marshmallow Challenge." In this experiment, four-year-old children were individually called into a room at Stanford University during the 1960s. There, a kind man gave a marshmallow to each of them and said they could eat the marshmallow right away, or wait for him to come back from an errand, at which point they would get two marshmallows. Some of the preschoolers covered their eyes or rested their heads on their arms so they wouldn't have to look at the marshmallow, and waited for the promised double prize.

Others—about a third of the group—simply watched the man leave and ate the marshmallow within seconds. What is surprising about this test is its diagnostic power: A dozen years later the same children were tracked down as adolescents and tested again. The emotional and social difference between the grab-the-marshmallow preschoolers and their gratification-delaying peers was dramatic. The ones who had resisted eating the marshmallow were clearly more socially competent than the others. They were less likely to go to pieces or regress under stress; they embraced challenges and pursued them instead of giving up; they were self-reliant, trustworthy, and dependable. The third or so who grabbed the marshmallow were more likely to be seen as shying away from social contacts, to be stubborn and indecisive, to be easily upset by frustrations, to think of themselves as unworthy, or to overreact to certain situations with a sharp temper.

And all because of a single marshmallow? In fact, Goleman explains, it's all because of a lone neuron in the brain, which bypasses the neocortex—the area of the brain where rational decisions are made—and goes straight to the amygdala, or emotional center of the brain. It is here that quicker, more primitive "fight or flight" responses occur, and are stored for future use. The more that emotional memories involving temper, frustration, depression, and fear pile up in early adolescence, the more the amygdala can hijack the rest of the brain by flooding it with strong and inappropriate emotions, causing us to wonder later why we overreacted. But if the emotions stored in the brain are those of restraint, self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy, and optimism, then we become endowed with an "emotional intelligence" that serves rather than enslaves us for the rest of our lives.