



## Sweet Success & Satisfaction

In their heyday, the Rolling Stones constantly [complained](#) about their incapacity to obtain *satisfaction*. Their lament has an ironic meaning in the broader context of a values-based theory of life.

With respect to the relationship between satisfaction and *work*, Gretchen Rubin, author of [The Happiness Project](#), highlighted [Tony Schwartz's viewpoint](#) on the difference between *pleasure* versus *satisfaction*. Enduring happiness, it seems, often requires delaying *gratification*.

By [recent accounts](#), Walter Mischel's classic marshmallow study tying longer-term *success* to the ability to delay gratification has been debunked. However, as evidenced by the personal [misfortune of so many](#) outwardly "successful" people, *happiness* is another matter and reality may be somewhat more nuanced with respect to success as well. [According to Sara Todd](#):

... there's a *strong correlation* between the ability to delay gratification from a young age and later achievement. But after accounting for a number of controls, including early indicators of the children's cognitive functioning, home environment, and family background, the correlation between delayed gratification and achievement was greatly reduced. (emphasis added)

As Jessica McCrory Calarco [interprets](#) the newer research results, "the capacity to hold out for a second marshmallow is shaped in large part by a child's social and economic background – and, in turn, that that background, not the ability to delay gratification, is what's behind kids' long-term success."

While such evidence may be taken as cause for the relative lack of achievement of disadvantaged persons, it does not *refute* the relevance of deferred gratification per se. Instead, it demonstrates the importance of helping disadvantaged individuals acquire the skills they need to succeed and, hopefully, gain satisfaction, if not also happiness. Among those skills is the ability to delay gratification. (See also [coping skills](#).) No long-term studies of large groups are required to demonstrate that fact. All that is required is an understanding of the *time value of money* and *compound interest*.

According to the theory of the [time value of money](#), we perceive a greater benefit from receiving money now rather than later. That's why interest is paid and earned, as compensation to the depositor or lender for the time value of their money. It also accounts for the value of *investment*. Investors forgo spending in expectation of receiving a favorable return on their money in the future.

[Compound interest](#) is generated when interest is reinvested so that interest is earned not only on the principal but also previously accumulated interest. Over time, compound interest overwhelms the original amount of the principal. According to the [Rule of 72](#), an interest rate of 7 percent, for example, will result in a doubling of principal in about 10 years, meaning that every year thereafter the accumulated amount of interest will exceed the principal. After 40 years the total interest will be nearly 15 times as much the original principal. In five decades, it will be 30 times as much. In six, 60 times as much.

Both compound interest and the time value of money are based on the principle of delayed gratification. For evolutionary reasons, human genes have not been naturally selected to facilitate delay of gratification for decades. So it is only natural not to consider the long-term implications of our actions. From a [humanistic](#) point of view, we cannot be "blamed" for that. However, human nature has imbued us with the capability to consider whether to do something about our [shortcomings](#), and if we decide not to do so, we should not be held immune from the results of our irresponsible inaction.

Compounding interest is an example of an [exponential function](#). While interest on savings is a type of positive [feedback](#) loop, the principle can apply negatively as well. For example, delaying savings and investment incurs a tremendous, exponentially increasing penalty. Moreover, non-financial matters may "spin out of control" until [critical mass](#) is achieved and a "[boil over](#)" or explosion occurs, literally or figuratively. Irresponsible, uncontrolled, emotionally driven behavior puts us as well as others at risk of adverse consequences.

Indeed, even well-intentioned actions risk [unintended consequences](#) when the collective impact of our actions races too far ahead of our ability to foresee the results. [Intent](#) is an important factor to be taken into account in judging criminal activities. However, since the results of politically motivated actions may affect far more people, politicians and political activists should be held to a higher standard of accountability. Good, emotionally satisfying intentions are not enough. The risk is too great. Instead, politicians and activists should be expected to adhere to the [physicians' creed](#): First, do no harm

Speaking of risk in our personal lives, three of the 12 steps Brenda Della Casa [recommends](#) to avoid feeling out of control are: First, figure out what we really want ... and really need. Second, give ourselves credit, literally speaking. Third, value accountability. In other words, we should clearly identify our goals, track our progress, and commit to taking measurable steps in the right direction.

With reference to direction in terms of moral values, no less authoritative source than the Bible asserts the [love of money](#) is the root of all evil and Malcolm Forbes has been credited as the source of the whimsical saying, "[He who dies with the most toys wins.](#)" Joking aside, it is clearly not money itself that is the problem but, rather, excessive focus on it, to the exclusion of other values. The accumulation of

money only becomes a problem when it is taken as the goal unto itself rather than simply a means to achieve more intrinsically meaningful objectives.

Indeed, income is a measure of how well we are supporting the significant, non-[whimsical](#) purposes of others, i.e., needs and desires for which they are willing to part with *their* money. For commercial enterprises, profit is the measure of how efficiently they are serving the desires of their customers, while consuming less value than they create.

In and of itself, [money](#) is merely a verifiable record accepted as payment for good and services and repayment of debt. It functions as a medium of exchange and a store of value. To some degree, it is a measure of the value of our limited time on earth. To disparage money and [capitalism](#) is to disrespect not on value *freely exchanged* but also *preserved* rather than consumed. In effect, such criticism is an endorsement of *unaccountability*, if not also *irresponsibility* and perhaps *coercive, socially and politically motivated force* as well. At worst, it demeans the lives of those who have chosen to consume less than they produce.

Doing so is tantamount to according undisciplined dictatorial, [mob rule](#) and immediate gratification primacy over personal saving and investing for greater good over the longer term. The mathematical implications of such behavior are clear and easy to anticipate.

With respect to the *time value of gratification*, some commentators suggest a more nuanced point of view through which it may be possible to [have our \(marshmallow\) cake and eat it too](#). In the March 2017 edition of [Psychology Today](#), Nick Tasler says:

Those who succeed are better finding other ways to gratify themselves until they reach [their] bigger goal[s]... By setting and achieving tiny goals every couple of days, we tap into a constant flow of immediate gratification needed to keep us motivated in pursuit of that distant goal... The secret to success ... is ... *discovering* gratification in every situation. It's about leveraging the unparalleled ability of the human mind to find — and focus on — small sources of gratification in any set of circumstances.

Tasler's thoughts recall two widely shared and ostensibly contradictory admonitions: "[Don't sweat the small stuff](#)" and "[Take care of the small things and the big things will take care of themselves](#)." While these statements seem to conflict, they are easily reconciled. The first implies we should not be stymied or discouraged by small, temporary, short-term difficulties and setbacks, much less by perceived personal slights. By contrast, the second directs us to focus on the small, measurable steps we *ourselves* can take each day in pursuit of our near-term objectives along the way toward realization of our longer-term goals.

As the late Mischel himself [explained](#):

People can use their wonderful brains to think differently about situations, to reframe them, to reconstrue them, to even reconstrue themselves ... What my life has been about is ... showing the potential for human beings, to not be the victims of their biographies — not their biological

biographies, not their social biographies ... to show ... the many ways in which people can change what they become and how they think.

In denial of Mischel's life mission, some neuroscientists question the capability of we human beings to manage our own behavior and exercise a reasonable degree of control over our fate. However, for things that truly matter and for those who care, Mischel's view suggests the need for each of us to engage in *informed consent*, [defined as](#) "agreement to do something or to allow something to happen only after all the relevant facts are known." In contracts, for example, enforceable agreement is reached only with full disclosure of everything the parties know that is relevant to the terms of the agreement.

In absence of informed consent, what conclusions might be drawn about someone who chooses to remain ignorant while withholding important information, with the expectation of not being held accountable for their behavior? What can be said of a government, business or society that engages in, if not also encourages such behavior?

Centralized planning implies control over others and it assumes ignorance on the part of those who are not among the elite, in-group of anointed planners. It is well-suited not only to more overt [dictatorships](#) but also – to the degree they impose coercive power over society and absolve their citizens of responsibility – so-called [social democracies](#). By contrast, distributed, decentralized planning embraces voluntarily coordinated action accompanied by personal accountability.

Again, the mathematical implications of those alternatives are clear and easily anticipated over the long-term. Indeed, they have already been demonstrated quite convincingly. So it is necessary to remain ignorant of history to overlook the unintended results, presumably for the sake of near-term gratification of believing something good has been done.

Recounting his life in his later days, Burt Reynolds [asserted](#), "Nobody had more fun than I did." Likewise, by measures of money and fun, the Stones have every reason to be satisfied. If it has been a competition, they certainly gave Burt a run for his money. Like him, they also imparted great pleasure to many others. However, whether mothers would choose such a life for their sons depends upon their own values.

Success may be sweet as a marshmallow but satisfaction requires something more or, at least, different.

Unless we feel endowed with [divinity](#), who are we to judge anyone else's personal values – so long as their behavior causes no harm to others? After all, like theirs, our values are also *personal*. On the other hand, the consequences of our actions are the true measure of our values, and in many instances, the results are easier for others to observe than for us to see for ourselves.

According to Wikipedia, the term [success](#) may refer to:

- Attainment of higher [social status](#)

In that case, the aim is to enhance our self-esteem in terms of the circular logic of our perception of how others perceive us.

- Achievement of a goal ...

A key issue is whether our goals are based upon our personal values or our perception of the expectations that society and particularly our peer groups place upon us. Another is how we measure and evaluate progress against our goals and ultimately define success.

- The opposite of [failure](#)

Perhaps we might hope to cheat failure by avoiding the establishment of goals and, thus, failing to try to accomplish much of anything. However, as has been [expressed in many different words](#), the only certain way to fail is to fail to try.

Moreover, truly meaningful success requires that we hold ourselves accountable for engaging each other freely and productively in the pursuit of objectives supporting our shared values. Toward that end, we should clearly document our values, goals, and objectives. Then we should share them and ask others not only to provide candid, [constructive feedback](#) but, better yet, to join our quest.

To the degree our goals are ambitious and realization may require engagement of *many* others, they are best shared freely on the Web in an open, standard, machine-readable format like Strategy Markup Language ([StratML](#)).

The vision of the StratML standard ([ISO 17469-1](#)) itself is quite audacious:

***A worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results.***

Without your help, together with the engagement of others like you, the vision simply cannot be realized. If you'd like to join the quest, check out the [use cases](#) that have been documented thus far as well as the types of [tools, apps, and services](#) that will be required ... become a [wonderful wizard](#) ... and share your intentions with the world ... preferably in StratML format. To get started, click [here](#) or, if you're up for a bit more of a challenge, [here](#).

The irony of the Stones' complaint is that by seeking satisfaction for its own sake, like many other celebrities, they may have prevented themselves from achieving it. On the other hand, that is for each of them to decide for himself.

A reasonable theory of the purpose of life is to continuously pursue goals supporting our personal values. In the actions we take between now and our final days, let's strive to avoid placing ourselves at risk of regret. Life is too short and precious for us to be satisfied with lesser expectations of ourselves.