



Importance of waiting

BETTER WAITING

Are people who are able to wait more successful in life?

We regularly come across situations where we have to wait in everyday life. It might be because the train's late, or we're in a traffic jam, waiting to see the doctor, or the kids haven't got their shoes on yet. Usually we don't much enjoy this time of feeling condemned to inactivity. But why is waiting seen as such a negative thing? And is it the same for everyone?

Generally speaking you can say that everyone is affected in some way by waiting. This day-to-day phenomenon is essentially experiencing time – however we don't always perceive it quite so neutrally. In our society, in which the goal is to utilise resources as effectively as possible – when we always perceive them to be scarce – doing nothing while we wait, interrupting our time flow, is experienced as a waste because it isn't productive. The result is impatience and irritability.

Furthermore, keeping people waiting is quite often used as a control mechanism to demonstrate superiority over the other person. Add to this the fact that we're often obliged to wait in public places where we don't feel particularly at ease. The importance of what we're waiting for governs the level of neutrality we attribute to the waiting experience. Imagine you're queuing for a concert ticket and you aren't sure whether you'll be able to get one of the last tickets.

Waiting for marshmallows – and what it says about us

Are you familiar with Walter Mischel's marshmallow test? In this psychological experiment conducted between 1968 and 1974, sweets were shown to four year-old children and they were given the choice of either eating the treat immediately or being given an additional one after a certain period of waiting. Some children successfully earned this delayed reward, but others did not. As the experiment continued, they identified a clear link between the ability to wait, in other words the reward/need delay in childhood, and subsequent academic or professional success! Admittedly other studies later showed cultural differences in the ability to wait: a comparative study for instance showed that children from Cameroon achieved far higher averages than German children. So being able to wait is dependent on a variety of time cultures.

If you are not one of those people who are able to wait calmly, it may also comfort you to know that the validity of Mischel's study is now viewed in a more differentiated capacity – and the ability to wait is not just seen as an element of self-control. The link with later achievement could only be stated as one-quarter based on self-control, they now say.



Strategies for fulfilled waiting

If waiting is such an inherent part of our lives, how can we make it more bearable? Or even enjoy it? The first step is to learn to experience down-time – or train yourself in mindfulness. Boredom is of central importance for a child's development. Adults can also become more productive and creative if they have nothing to do other than let their thoughts wander. Give it a try next time you have to wait – don't look at

your phone, pay attention to your thoughts. Just doing this turns the waiting period into valuable meditation time. People who practise yoga also like to use the time of inactivity for breathing exercises. Consciously breathing in and out activates the parasympathetic nervous system and the body switches to relaxation mode – especially if more time is spent exhaling than inhaling.

Here's our little breathing exercise for the next time you're waiting somewhere: breathe in through your nose as you count to four. Hold your breath while counting to four. And breathe out to a count of eight. Good luck!

Where's the best place to wait?

The more attractive the location, the more pleasant it is to wait there. Imagine you're sitting on the beach waiting for the sun to set. What could be nicer? Or you're sitting on a comfy sofa watching the world go by. Take inspiration from our furnishing solutions and take a look at a selection of different waiting and reception areas. Where would you most love to wait? And what for?

Literature sources

Stangl, W. (2019). Stichwort: 'Marshmallow-Test'. Online Lexikon für Psychologie und Pädagogik. <https://lexikon.stangl.eu/3697/marshmallow-test/> (2019-10-14)

Westhoff, A. and J. (2016). Deutschlandradio Kultur, Zeitfragen / Archive feature from 04.08.2016

Gelitz, C. (2018). Marshmallow-Test. Wurde das berühmte psychologische Experiment falsch interpretiert? Psychologie / Hirnforschung. Feature dated 31.05.2018