



*Stepping Stones for the Good Life*  
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**The Maybe Later Technique (MLT)**  
From the Desk of Glenda Haskell, *Life Coach*

In their book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, Roy Baumeister and John Tierney include a chapter they call The Perfect Storm of Dieting. In this chapter, they offer three key observations about eating based on what they and others have learned through their research:

1. Never go on “a diet.” [quote marks added]
2. Never vow to completely give up a particular food (like chocolate).
3. Never blame anyone who is overweight (you or someone else) on a lack of willpower.

(Just in case you read my earlier issue in this series about black-and-white decisions, my decision to give up sweets goes squarely against their second bit of advice. Okay, go ahead--call me crazy. It wouldn't be the first time. ☺)

The problem with “diets,” the authors say, is that many such diets allow only a specific number of calories per day. In doing so, they create a rigid, external set of rules the dieter must live up to. A major trap that dieters can fall into, though, has been called the *What the Hell* syndrome, which I expect most of us have run into at one time or another in our lives. Once we exceed something like a calorie limit, it's all too easy to say—yes, “What the hell”—and eat whatever we want to for the rest of the day to the tune of “I've blown it anyway, so I might as well enjoy myself.”

What's a good alternative to the What the Hell response? Enter the Maybe Later Technique, somewhat loosely based on the study of an intervention by Dr. Baumeister and colleagues, as described below. [Having had to return *Willpower* to the library because there's a long queue of people waiting to read it, the description below, drawn from my admittedly less than perfect memory, may not match the experiment details exactly.]

In the study, individuals from several different groupings of research subjects were seated one at a time near a bowl of M&Ms. Research subjects in one group were told to eat all they wanted, a second group was told to tell themselves, “Not now but later,” and the individuals in a third group weren't given any particular instructions. Then, in the final part of the experiment, each individual was then told that he or she was the final subject of the day and should help themselves to the remaining M&Ms. (In reality, the experimenters were able to measure how much candy each person consumed during this final part of the experiment.). In findings that surprised the experimenters, the “Not now but later” group ate the fewest M&Ms during the final part of the experiment and even a few days later still expressed the lowest levels of interest in eating M&Ms.

Extrapolating from this study, a helpful approach to steer clear of temptation is the Maybe Later Technique. [I've given it this tag, which I modified slightly from the exact words using by the experimenters.] Think MLT instead of BLT. By saying “Maybe later,” you're not denying yourself. Nor are you “giving in” to temptation. You're simply buying yourself time and steering clear of a firm decision—for now and maybe until a time later on when you have a larger supply of will power available and can more easily say no.

So next time temptation stares in the face (and this could be under all manner of circumstances), try smiling and saying to yourself or others, “Maybe later.”

