

# Simple questionnaire predicts unprotected sex, binge drinking

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Researchers in the social sciences have been searching for a holy grail:

an accurate way to predict who is likely to engage in problematic behavior, like using drugs. Over the years experts in economics, psychology and public health have designed hundreds of questionnaires in an attempt to understand who will binge drink or have unprotected sex – and why.

Valerie Reyna, professor of human development, and Evan Wilhelms, Ph.D. '15, of Vassar College, have just taken a sizable step toward answering those questions.

In a new study, Reyna and Wilhelms have debuted a new questionnaire that significantly outperforms 14 other gold-standard measures frequently used in economics and psychology. The measure's 12 simple questions ask in various ways whether one agrees with the principle "sacrifice now, enjoy later." Their study, "Gist of Delay of Gratification: Understanding and Predicting Problem Behaviors," appeared Aug. 10 in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

"People who get drunk frequently, party with drugs, borrow money needlessly or have [unprotected sex](#) disagreed more with the concept 'sacrifice now, enjoy later' than people who didn't do these things," Reyna said. "Instead, they leaned more toward 'have fun today and don't worry about tomorrow.'"

Having fun is generally good, she said. "But not being able to delay gratification can interfere with education, health and financial well-being, and the impact is greater for young people," she added.

The questionnaire is based on Reyna's fuzzy-trace theory. It says people boil down their personal values into a simple, qualitative "gist" of an idea – such as "sacrifice now, enjoy later." When they have to make a life decision, they retrieve that gist and apply it to their situation.

In contrast, prevailing theory, with many questionnaires based on it, says that people make specific, quantitative trade-offs known as "delay discounting." For example, those measures ask questions like, "Would you like \$10 now or \$11.50 in a week?"

"People do size up the trade-off, but they don't make their decisions on that analysis," Reyna said. "They think, 'sacrifice now, benefit later.' And therefore they study for the exam rather than go out to the party. It's not about the party per se. It's about the life principle."

The researchers conducted four studies to get their results, comparing the measure, the Delay-of-Gratification Gist Scale, against 14 others. The Gist Scale's questions include, "I wait to buy what I want until I have enough money," "I think it is better to save money for the future" and "I am worried about the amount of money I owe." Money is used as a "stand-in" or proxy for tempting rewards.

The first study asked 211 [college students](#) to take the Gist Scale and other measures that predict poor financial outcomes. The second and third studies, with 845 and 393 college students, respectively, compared the new measure against others involving delay discounting. With 47 teens and adult participants, the fourth study compared the Gist Scale against a widely used measure of impulsivity.

The Gist Scale is not only more accurate, it's also shorter and simpler – some other measures are more than twice as long. It is also gender and age neutral, meaning it can be taken by anyone.

Reyna points out that cultures all over the world have aphorisms that encourage the ability to delay gratification. That skill can improve with practice, she said.

"Sometimes we send [young people](#) very mixed messages about struggle.

I think it's extremely important for them to know that struggle and pain are part of life and to be expected," she said. "Staying the course, keeping your eyes on the prize – these values make a difference. And they can be taught and they can be practiced."

**More information:** Valerie F. Reyna et al. The Gist of Delay of Gratification: Understanding and Predicting Problem Behaviors, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/bdm.1977](https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.1977)

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