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It's About Time

Time is one of the most influential factors affecting human behavior. Objectively, time is something that can be measured in a very specific manner. However, individuals' subjective perspective on time also has a profound influence on behavior, and in turn can affect health.

Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo has been studying subjective time perspective since the 1970s. Time perspective essentially refers to how the flow of human experience gets parceled into the time frames of past, present, and future. People often have a tendency to over- or under-emphasize one of these time frames, and this affects choices and actions. Zimbardo has been able to reliably measure and categorize time perspective into several dimensions:

- Past-Negative – reflects a generally negative and pessimistic view of the past, which often involves focus on pain, regret, or trauma
- Past-Positive – reflects a sentimental, warm, and nostalgic view of the past
- Present-Hedonistic – reflects a focus on present pleasure and benefit without regard for future consequences
- Present-Fatalistic – reflects an attitude of helplessness and hopelessness in which one sees little connection between present behavior and future circumstances
- Future – reflects an orientation in which present behavior is dominated by striving for future goals

Specifically with respect to health, there are tendencies associated with these dimensions. Persons with a “past-negative” focus tend to experience more negative emotions and

are generally less happy than those with a past-positive perspective. Persons high on the “past-positive” dimension often cope well with stress, and generally are happy, resilient, and optimistic. Individuals marked by the “present-hedonistic” dimension may not follow prevention guidelines (e.g., health screenings), may use/abuse substances, and may take risks (e.g., “if it feels good, do it”). Those high on the “present-fatalism” dimension also tend to be anxious or depressed, in part because they generally believe that the present has little influence on the future; they also tend to be risk-taking, but more due to an apathetic attitude rather than pleasure-seeking. Not surprisingly, people whose time perspective is mostly characterized as “future” tend to practice healthy behaviors, avoid taking unnecessary risks, and generally focus on achieving goals; these individuals also tend to cope well with stressful and/or traumatic events.

From these descriptions, it may seem obvious that both the past-positive and future time perspectives are healthiest. However, a downside to the future perspective is that the work-oriented and time press emphasis has been associated with an increased incidence of coronary artery disease, at least for men. Furthermore, life is lived in the present.

People are best understood by looking at how they score on each of the time perspective dimensions. Space does not permit a review of all possible combinations of these dimensions. Zimbardo does describe the healthiest combination, a balanced time perspective: high present-hedonistic, high future, and high past-positive. The present-hedonism allows the individual to enjoy life and be fully engaged in the present, but the future perspective tempers this so that the person is able to avoid risks and appropriately delay gratification. The addition of the past-positive rounds out the ingredients for well-being and life satisfaction. Also important is flexibility in order to shift time perspective based on circumstances.

While people tend to have strong habits/tendencies toward one or more of these time perspective dimensions, there is emerging evidence that people can modify their time perspectives. Zimbardo’s work provides a unique point of view for time management, and how one’s perspective of time can affect health behavior. Much of how we live our lives is about time.

Note: Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd have a 2008 book on this topic, titled The Time Paradox.

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