



e-quilibrium

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Present Time

Many people have intentions to change one or more behaviors that are health-related. However, these intentions often are without implementation plans, at least not in the immediate future. Hence, the plan is to make the change "someday."

Investigators from the University of Chicago and the University of Toronto recently published the results of several of their studies in the Journal of Consumer Research. The focus of their work was on how individuals think about time, and how this affects task initiation.

Their basic hypothesis was that when the deadline for a task is perceived to be in a time category "like-the-present," the task is more likely to be initiated than when the deadline is perceived to be in a time category "unlike-the-present." For example, "this week" is "like-the-present," whereas "next week" is "unlike-the-present." In one of their studies, participants were told that a task was due in 5 days. For participants given the task on April 24, the deadline was April 29 (i.e., "like-the-present" because the deadline was within the same month). For participants given the task on April 27, the deadline was May 2 (i.e., "unlike-the-present" because the deadline was the next month). The variable of interest was when the participants intended to start working on the task. Indeed, those in the "like-the-present" condition were significantly more likely to start immediately than were those in the "unlike-the-present" condition, even though the deadline was the same number of days away.

The investigators also found that they could manipulate perceptions of “like-the-present” and “unlike-the-present” by shading portions of the calendar. Deadlines for tasks that fell within shaded areas that included the present day were more likely to be initiated than those with deadlines in shaded areas that did not include the present day... even though the time to the deadline was identical. The conclusion drawn from the studies was that the intention to implement a task is stronger when the deadline is perceived to be in a time category that is “like-the-present.”

While these investigators were primarily concerned with consumer behavior, there are certainly implications for health-related behavior. If the perceived target date for getting a screening test (e.g., colonoscopy, mammogram, etc.) is in a time category “like-the-present” (i.e., “this month” versus “in 30 days”), the appointment may be readily made rather than put off. Similar effects could be anticipated with target dates to initiate exercise or quit smoking.

This research gives substance to quotes such as “the time is now,” often used as encouragement to initiate a task. Indeed, how we think can profoundly affect how we behave, and with respect to health behavior, there is no time like the present.

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