



How the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Warping Our Sense of Time

What day is it, again? COVID-19 has put our lives at a standstill. Here's why that can make the whole experience seem longer.

By Leslie Nemo | May 1, 2020 1:30 PM



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Quick, without looking at a calendar — what day is it? Are you sure?

If you can't answer confidently, you're not the only one feeling this way. Even the psychologists who study time perception have felt their days ooze into one another. "I've experienced it myself," says Kevin LaBar, a psychologist and neuroscientist at Duke University. "As this drags on, and as your day becomes very constrained by your limited environment, the days kind of blend together."

Stressful, worldwide events that confine everyone to their homes aren't exactly common, so researchers like LaBar don't know how, precisely, the current pandemic will distort someone's temporal perception. But other investigations into negative emotions and time might provide some clues — as well as a few ways to cope.

Time, Warped

Most experiments that try detangling our feelings from our sense of time look at short intervals, like seconds or minutes of strong emotions, LaBar says. Those studies show that scary or stressful experiences tend to feel longer. People seeing neutral and threatening faces in a lab scenario, for example, report they saw the upset face for longer. In reality, the faces appeared for equal amounts of time.

When researchers examine people's brain activity in response to these sights, they see that we **devote more attention to what's in front of us when it's threatening**, LaBar says. It's possible the attention-suck of scary incidents explains why they seem to last longer. If something alarming demands more of our mental resources, then we look back and feel as if the encounter must have taken more time — it took all that investment, after all.

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Constantly worrying about the coronavirus might pull a similar trick on our brains, LaBar thinks. “You're devoting more of your resources — both your attention resources and memory resources — to processing information about the event,” he says. “That extends the feeling that it's lasting longer.”

Another theory for why stressful periods drag out hinges on a different biological shift. Some psychologists think that humans have a sense of an

internal clock that ticks at a regular pace. Anxiety or fear makes that essential rhythm in our bodies click faster. In a stressful moment, we don't know how much time is passing, LaBar says. The only metric we have is how often that driving rhythm beats. We are used to the slower pulse of calm moments, so when we try to remember how long the anxiety lasted, we might think it took longer because our clock sped up in that moment. So far, there is some research that backs up this concept, LaBar says.

If it's not enough to feel like our most stressful moments are dragging out, we also have fewer distractions these days than we did before. Our brains love a chance to take in new information, LaBar says. Going out to lunch, even, can serve up enough stimulation and satisfy that craving. But now we're all spending most of our time at home. "When you're in a constrained environment, your brain is not getting as many squirts of dopamine that keep it engaged and excited, and the brain ends up in this idling mode," LaBar says.

If we don't give our brains something to do, we tend to self-reflect — and the ongoing global health crisis seems like a convenient problem for the mind to mull over. Worrying over the same topic repeatedly "can make it seem like you've invested longer, because you're actually just re-engaging these thought processes on the pandemic," LaBar says.

It's Hard — But Try Thinking About Something Else

One clear way to stop this cycle — and maybe make things feel as if they're proceeding at a normal pace again — is simply finding something to do. Calling loved ones and going for walks can be great ways to redirect your mind to something else, LaBar says.

And the classic idiom that "time flies when you're having fun" is backed up by

research, explains Annett Schirmer, a brain science researcher at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, via email. “How we perceive time depends on where we place our focus of attention. If we place it on time, time passes more slowly. However, if our attention is captured by something else, time can fly because its passage is less noticed.”

Schirmer also points out that disrupted schedules and new tasks, like taking care of kids while working, could also impact our sense of time. LaBar says it could be helpful to put some of that structure back into your life — maybe only do certain activities on certain days of the week, or get up at the same time every day.

Regular habits can keep your sleep cycle functioning smoothly, too, he points out, and sleep might build a better sense of time. **Quality rest helps create memories**, and it could be harder to recall what your days are like without a good snooze to cement that time in your brain. “You’re trying to remember this period of time compared to the period of time before the pandemic,” he says, “but if you don’t have good memories of what those things are like, then that can create some distortion as well.”

For now, LaBar and Schirmer say these explanations for our warped sense of time are still speculation. Schirmer warns that the complex relationship between emotion and time might mean that other factors could crop up in pandemic-related behaviors that researchers haven’t identified yet.

That’s partly why LaBar and his lab are collecting survey data this week on how people are coping with so much widespread uncertainty. During the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, surveys found that people could help **manage their anxiety** about the situation — such as worries about when the panic would end or when there would be a vaccine — by problem-solving in smaller ways. Finding and making masks, figuring out how to social distance in the workplace, or planning a better approach to at-home schooling might help people cope with bigger uncertainties, LaBar says. His team is collecting data

to see if they can replicate the H1N1 study results.

After all, many of those larger questions we have about the pandemic revolve around time — and big, distant intervals are more challenging for us to comprehend. “We’re in uncharted territory in terms of the science of timing something this long,” LaBar adds.

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