

How to Make Time Pass More Quickly

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

September 11, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › When you're busy, you tend to sense time as going faster than when you're bored
- › People with depression report a slower subjective experience of time because they have difficulty being in the present moment or entering a state of consciousness known as "flow"
- › When you're immersed in flow, your sense of time becomes distorted because nearly all of your brain's available inputs are devoted to the activity at hand
- › Practicing mindfulness slows down time so you don't feel as though your days go by in a blur

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 23, 2017.

People think of time as moving along a fixed linear pathway, but in reality, time, including how fast or slow it moves, is all a matter of perception. This is why watching a movie you love feels like it flies by, while to another person who finds the movie boring, it moves tediously slow.

Other peculiarities have also been observed, such as how time moves faster as you get older and it's possible to lose track of time entirely if you're engrossed in a task. Likewise, when French geologist Michele Siffre conducted an isolation experiment in the 1960s, it showed that our perception of time changes depending on our circumstances.

He lived in a dark cave, alone, for two months, but when his team came to get him, he thought he'd only stayed for 35 days.¹ Further, when he counted off an estimation of 120 seconds while living in the cave (via a phone that only worked one way), he counted for a full five minutes.²

In an interview with Cabinet magazine, Siffre said, "I psychologically experienced five real minutes as though they were two ... There was a very large perturbation in my sense of time ... My psychological time had compressed by a factor of two."³

'Time Doesn't Exist Outside of Our Own Experience of It'

It's interesting to note that when Siffre was asked what he thought caused the dramatic disconnect between actual time and his perceived psychological time, he said:⁴

"That's a big question that I've been investigating for 40 years. I believe that when you are surrounded by night – the cave was completely dark, with just a light bulb – your memory does not capture the time. You forget."

In some ways, what he experienced is similar to what happens when you're immersed in an activity you love and suddenly realize you lost track of time. In The Atlantic, senior editor James Hamblin, M.D., wrote:⁵

"We conceptualize time through metaphors that project it along a straight line – before and after, long and short, earlier and later – as a function of how our perceptions relate to other perceptions. In the same way, the accuracy of any given clock is only relative to other clocks. Because time doesn't clearly exist outside of our own experience of it, there are ways to manipulate that experience."

He used Siffre's experience with time after sensory deprivation as one example, as well as the hallucinogenic drug peyote, which is known to cause changes in sense of time, such as time passing more slowly, as another. Being **diagnosed with a terminal illness** also changes your perception of time.

"I can't generally advise spending years on peyote or full-time isolation in a cave," he noted. "The most practical examples of manipulating time perception come from the common observation that the more we think about time, the slower it goes." Hamblin wrote:⁶

"In his treatise, The Principles of Psychology, William James wrote, 'A day full of excitement, with no pause, is said to pass 'ere we know it.' On the contrary, a day full of waiting, of unsatisfied desire for change, will seem a small eternity."

Depression Slows Down Time, 'Flow' Makes You Lose Track of It

Alan Burdick, author of "Why Time Flies," revealed that when you're busy, you tend to sense time as going faster than when you're bored. Similarly, a study of more than 800 people revealed people with depression reported a slower subjective experience of time.⁷

As for why depressed people feels time is dragging, it's due to a slowing down of the internal clock or because they have difficulty being in the present moment or entering a state of consciousness known as "flow."⁸

Flow, according to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is the secret to happiness and occurs when you are completely absorbed in an activity (often one that involves creativity).⁹ When you're immersed in flow, your sense of time becomes distorted because nearly all of your brain's available inputs are devoted to the activity at hand, Csikszentmihalyi states.

If you're depressed and unable to fully give your attention to the present moment, and as a result find time is agonizingly slow, mindfulness-based therapies are very helpful, particularly in cases of a depressed perception of time.¹⁰ Interestingly, mindfulness also slows down your perception of time while helping you to appreciate your surroundings.

How Busy You Are Alters Your Perception of Time

If you're too busy, flying through your daily routines on autopilot mode, you will feel like your day is over in the blink of an eye.

Neuroscientist David Eagleman, Ph.D., adjunct professor at Stanford University, explained that your mental engagement changes your perception of time, and when you're engaged in mundane activities your brain isn't taking in much new information. As a result, time passes quickly.¹¹ One of the areas of the brain responsible for emotion and memory is the amygdala.

The more detailed the memory the longer the moment appears to last. This is one of the reasons why it feels like forever when you're stuck in traffic, but your memory of the event will be that it passed quickly, as you didn't lay down any new memory.

This is where **mindfulness** comes in, as staying in the moment slows down the passage of time. Steven Meyers, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Roosevelt University in Chicago, told The Huffington Post:¹²

"Mindfulness allows people to appreciate their surroundings and leads to the feeling that time is passing more slowly. Paying attention to events that are pleasant or interesting certainly enhances our mood and allows us to savor positive experiences."

Mindfulness Slows Down Time

Practicing "mindfulness" means you're actively paying attention to the moment you're in right now. Rather than letting your mind wander, when you're mindful, you're living in the moment and letting distracting thoughts pass through your mind without getting caught up in their emotional implications.

Add mindfulness to virtually any aspect of your day simply by paying attention to the sensations you are experiencing in the present moment. Techniques used to become more mindful include:¹³

- Paying focused attention to an aspect of sensory experience, such as the sound of your own breathing
- Distinguishing between simple thoughts and those that are elaborated with emotion (such as "I have a test tomorrow" versus "What if I fail my test tomorrow and flunk my entire class?")
- Reframing emotional thoughts as simply "mental projections" to let your mind rest

Meyers added in The Huffington Post:¹⁴

"Time slips by because we are blindly going through the routine of our day ... There are a range of remedies for this situation. Some people feel a sense of accomplishment if they set personal goals for themselves and work towards them in a purposeful way. Others need to be on the lookout for certain events – like appreciating a kind behavior from another person – to punctuate time passing."

Staying Busy Benefits Your Brain

Keeping a packed schedule makes it feel like your days fly by, particularly if you don't make it a point to be mindful, but doing so offers significant benefits to your brain. Research published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience* suggests that the saying "the busier the better" is true, at least as far as cognition is concerned.¹⁵

Greater busyness was associated with better cognition, particularly for episodic memory. It didn't matter if the study participant was 50 or 89 years old, having a busier schedule was linked to improved memory and better brain processing, reasoning and vocabulary.

The researchers pointed out that busy people have increased opportunities for new learning, which has been shown to promote the retention of new neurons in the brain's hippocampus. In addition, busyness promotes the development of neural scaffolding and consequently facilitates cognition, according to the researchers, while promoting the development of brain reserves and the use of more efficient cognitive processing.¹⁶

There are downsides to being overly busy, of course, like chronic stress and burnout. Along those lines, healthy eating is often one of the first things to suffer when life gets busy, so it's important to stick to the basics in this regard – focus on filling your plate with real, unprocessed foods, preferably organic and locally grown, and avoid resorting to convenience and fast foods, energy drinks or excessive amounts of caffeine to keep going.

However, a busy lifestyle is also a positive one if you stay mindful and engage in activities that lead to flow. The more engaged you are, the more you will feel as though you're living your life beyond the constraints of time instead of by them.

Sources and References

- [Time May 19, 2016](#)
- [Naturally Savvy \(Archived\)](#)
- ^{1, 5, 6} [The Atlantic February 2, 2017](#)
- ² [Johns Hopkins University, "Time, In Perspective"](#)
- ^{3, 4} [Cabinet Summer 2008](#)
- ⁷ [Journal of Affective Disorders April 1, 2015, Volume 175, Pages 359-372](#)
- ^{8, 10} [The Huffington Post March 18, 2015](#)
- ⁹ [The Pursuit of Happiness, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#)
- ^{11, 12, 14} [The Huffington Post August 23, 2013](#)
- ¹³ [Time September 30, 2015](#)
- ^{15, 16} [Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience May 17, 2016](#)