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Overindulgence in Lockdown: Hedonism and the perception of time

Dr. Trudy Meehan, PhD., D.Clin.Psych.

Lecturer in the Center for Positive Psychology and Health, RCSI

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In our regular lives, we are slaves to the passing of time - the inevitable movement into the future, the daily routines, demands placed on us by work. Living with the new public health restrictions means that most of us will be experiencing significant departures from our routine. Time may go faster, with us seeming to get nothing productive done all day – the experience of many parents trying to work from home. Or time is crawling, days feeling endless, lonely even – the experience of some who have lost their jobs or many of our elderly who are cocooning. Whatever your situation, one thing is sure, the lockdown has considerably changed how we pass the time and altered how we think about the past, present, and future. Significantly, our control over how we use our time is severely restricted. Loss of control can negatively impact on our feeling of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is our belief in our ability to influence events that affect our lives. The stronger our feeling of self-efficacy is, the more well-being we experience.

Psychologist Albert Bandura, now aged 93, reflected,

“without a resilient sense of efficacy, people are easily overwhelmed by adversities in their efforts to improve their lives and that of others”¹.

So lockdown has taken a lot of our agency and impacted on how we experience time and routines. Many of us feel like we are overindulging in food, alcohol, watching series, gaming, or other things, as a way to cope with this loss of control. Is there anything we can do to reclaim some control, some sense of self-efficacy? Should we be trying to limit our overindulgence? Researchers in positive psychology have looked at the impact of how we experience and think about time. There are some helpful insights from their work that might prove useful in these strange times. *Time Perspective* - what time in our lives we focus on and how, can impact our psychological and physiological health². Using the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory we can look at our own time perspectives..

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Past, Present, Future – negative or positive

Do we spend most of the day thinking negatively about the past, or do we have enjoyable reminiscences? Are we dreaming and hoping for the future? Have we allowed worries in the present moment, and are we catastrophizing the future? Do we focus on the present and enjoy the moment? Or do we feel dread and immobilized in our current experience?

Various time perspectives are adaptive and helpful in different circumstances. Time perspective research gives us some ideas about what might be useful in the current lockdown situation, particularly concerning our tendency to overindulge.

Future Positive

There is a link between future-orientation and well-being . People who use the time in the present moment to think about and prepare for the future tend to report higher levels of global life satisfaction . Focusing on the positive future in this lockdown situation will increase feelings of life satisfaction, optimism, hope, and self-efficacy. There's an activity called [The Best Possible Self Diary](#) that can help us structure our thinking around our future positive self. Research has demonstrated that this exercise is beneficial for helping us tap into a future positive time perspective. It is also an effective happiness boosting activity⁵.

Present Positive

Having a positive take on the present will obviously be good for us. Psychologists Zimbardo and Boyd⁶ took this one step further and suggested that focusing on the present with a hedonistic framework could be beneficial in the short term. Like all things hedonistic – this approach is both good and bad. In a lockdown scenario, it's an adaptive strategy. It helps us enjoy the present and takes our mind off the future. When we see it as adaptive, we can understand why so many of us have been overindulging. It allows us to have understanding and compassion for ourselves. If we feel shame over our lack of willpower, we should let it go. However, we need to remember certain dangers of hedonism – addiction, ill health, obesity, disappointment with lack of achievement in the future, and depression. Knowing that a present hedonistic time perspective is one we are likely to fall into during a lockdown, and knowing it has certain dangers, what can we do? We can start to recognize it and be mindful when we overindulge. We can label the behavior and then address it. We can acknowledge that it is adaptive and comforting, and then find ways to be present positive in a hedonist but not self-defeating way . We can focus on the pleasures we have in the present, and try to limit worrying about the future. We can try to let go of control and the need for predictability. We can try to let go of the need for consistency and routine. We can steal moments of calm through mindfulness. We can enjoy small sensual pleasures. Using the idea of [savoring](#) (intensely feeling joy and appreciating the experience of feeling pleasure), we can do this in moderation.

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The Past

During the lockdown, the past can be our enemy. Most of us will have had the experience of losing a whole morning, or even entire days. We are left wondering where the time has passed and how we've managed to let time go by without achieving anything productive. Let it go – lockdown lends itself to slippages in time and failures in productivity. The lack of structure and routine will continually slip us up and slow us down. We will have many days where looking back on the very recent past will evoke feelings of shame and failure. Many of us are doing 'badly'; many of us are struggling. Looking back on lost hours or days will weigh us down with negative emotion, taint the present and weigh down our attempts to step toward our preferred future.

More globally, ruminating negatively about the distant past is definitely something to be avoided in lockdown. Past-negative thinking can leave us vulnerable to depressive thinking patterns. If you are at home and feel yourself starting to fixate on negative memories of the past, you can try a thought exercise that asks you to treat your thinking like a slide show. Use a slide show metaphor, and try to switch out slides of old negative memories with slides of positive moments from the present or imagined positive future realities. Conversely, those of us who are lucky enough to have a bank of positive memories to draw on have a fantastic resource available to us. We can pass the time reminiscing and reflecting on the past, and regard past achievements as indicators for a positive outcome in our future.

Lockdown and time keeps rushing past

Regardless of how we perceive the passing of time in lockdown, there is a lot of pressure, particularly on social media, to use this time productively. There are opportunities to be fantastic, but also a lot of opportunities to feel like a failure.

Another pressure lockdown presents is that of an unknown and scary future. If we have a fatalistic view of the future, we are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviours in the present. We could fall prey to negative thoughts about the future. If we fail to hold onto hope, we risk getting stuck in a present hedonistic behavior pattern that will hinder our future selves.

Time perception research suggests that we should be compassionate to ourselves right now, and put efforts to better ourselves into the future positive part of our lives. Set goals for our best self and imagine that happening in the future. We should lay the groundwork now if we can, but don't pressurize ourselves. It reminds us not to expect too much of ourselves in the present moment. We should be present positive, even allowing ourselves to be a very tiny bit hedonistic. In our present day-to-day moments, savour small pleasures, look for moments of play and novelty, let go of routine where we can. Let go of failures and don't ruminate on them, connect, and try to find small slivers of joy in the present moment.

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The Best Possible Self Diary

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best_possible_self

Savoring

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/10_steps_to_savoring_the_good_things_in_life