

COVID-19 lockdowns linked to less accurate recollection of event timing

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Similar to a landscape where objects/people are placed in relation to others, a timescape puts the event timeline in relation to other events. Credit: Arianna Sahraie Photography, CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Participants in a survey study made a relatively high number of errors when asked to recollect the timing of major events that took place in

2021, providing new insights into how COVID-19 lockdowns impacted perception of time. Daria Pawlak and Arash Sahraie of the University of Aberdeen, UK, present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Remembering when past events occurred becomes more difficult as more time passes. In addition, people's activities and emotions can influence their perception of the passage of time. The [social isolation](#) resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns significantly impacted people's activities and emotions, and prior research has shown that the pandemic triggered distortions in people's perception of time.

Inspired by that earlier research and clinical reports that patients have become less able to report accurate timelines of their medical conditions, Pawlak and Sahraie set out to deepen understanding of the pandemic's impact on time perception.

In May 2022, the researchers conducted an [online survey](#) in which they asked 277 participants to give the year in which several notable recent events occurred, such as when Brexit was finalized or when Meghan Markle joined the British royal family. Participants also completed standard evaluations for factors related to [mental health](#), including levels of boredom, depression, and resilience.

As expected, participants' recollection of events that occurred further in the past was less accurate. However, their perception of the timing of events that occurred in 2021—one year prior to the survey—was just as inaccurate as for events that occurred three to four years earlier. In other words, many participants had difficulty recalling the timing of events coinciding with COVID-19 lockdowns.

Additionally, participants who made more errors in event timing were also more likely to show greater levels of depression, anxiety, and

physical mental demands during the pandemic, but had less resilience. Boredom was not significantly associated with timeline accuracy.

These findings are similar to those previously reported for prison inmates. The authors suggest that accurate recollection of event timing requires "anchoring" [life events](#), such as birthday celebrations and vacations, which were lacking during COVID-19 lockdowns.

The authors add, "Our paper reports on altered timescapes during the pandemic. In a landscape, if features are not clearly discernible, it is harder to place objects/yourself in relation to other features. Restrictions imposed during the pandemic have impoverished our timescape, affecting the [perception](#) of event timelines. We can recall that events happened, we just don't remember when."

More information: Daria Pawlak et al, Lost time: Perception of events timeline affected by the COVID pandemic, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0278250](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278250)

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