

Time is what we make of it

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Ask anyone working on a project, and the biggest complaint one hears is "There's not enough time." But instead of more time, maybe what they need is a change of perception.

"Research has shown that it's not necessarily the time pressure, but it's the perception of that time pressure that affects you," says Michael DeDonno, a doctoral student in psychology at Case Western Reserve University. "If you feel you don't have enough time to do something, it's going to affect you."

DeDonno recently studied 163 subjects performing the Iowa Gambling Task (IGT), a popular psychological assessment tool, to investigate the effect of perceived time pressure on a learning-based task. His study, the first to look at the relationship between perceived time pressure and IGT performance, was published in the December issue of *Judgment and Decision Making*.

He divided the study's participants into two groups: an experimental group that was informed the time allotted to perform the task was insufficient and the control group which was told they had typically sufficient time to complete the task.

In the IGT, participants choose from among four decks of cards with the goal of making as much money as possible. Two of the decks are "good decks", yielding a positive utility, and two are "bad decks", with a negative utility.

The idea is to figure out which decks are good decks in the quickest amount of time to maximize profit over the course of the task.

Both groups were actually given sufficient time to complete the task, which involved 100 trials for each participant. However, each of the two groups was further broken down into subgroups, with one subgroup being given less time between card selections to think about the task.

But results show that participants who were advised the time was insufficient performed worse than those who were told they had enough time, regardless of the actual time allotted.

"If I told you that you didn't have enough time, your performance was low regardless if you had ample time or not," DeDonno says. "If you were told you had enough time, in both scenarios, they out performed those who were told they didn't. "

DeDonno says there are plenty of real-world benefits to understanding the effects of perceived time pressure on decision-making performance. He cited project team members who perceived a high degree of time pressure had lower job satisfaction. He also noted standardized tests, like the ACT or LSAT, have a high rate of test anxiety by test takers due mostly to time constraints.

He also wants to further the study to examine time perception with HMO physicians in relation to time spent with patients and diagnostic accuracy. Will a perception of time being insufficient by HMO physicians lead to inappropriate medications or an increase in diagnostic error?

While it remains to be determined why perceived time pressure can impair performance, DeDonno says that there are ways to combat it.

"Decision-making can be emotion based, keep your emotions in check. Have confidence in the amount of time you do have to do things. Try to focus on the task and not the time. We don't control time, but we can control our perception. It's amazing what you can do with a limited amount of time.

"Time is relevant. Just have the confidence with the time you're given. I tell my students 'Do the best you can in the time allotted. When it ends, it ends.'"

Source: Case Western Reserve University

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