

Psychologists show that future-minded people make better decisions for their health

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When New Year's Eve rolls around and you're deciding whether to have another glass of champagne, your decision may be predicted by your perspective of the future.

A pair of Kansas State University researchers found that people who tend to think in the long term are more likely to make positive decisions about their health, whether it's how much they drink, what they eat, or their decision to wear sunscreen.

"If you are more willing to pick later, larger rewards rather than taking the immediate payoff, you are more future-minded than present-minded," said James Daugherty, a doctoral student in psychology who led the study. "You're more likely to exercise and less likely to smoke and drink."

Daugherty conducted the research with Gary Brase, K-State associate professor of psychology. The research was presented in November at the Society for Judgment and Decision Making conference in Boston. It also appears in the January 2010 issue of the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

In addition to comparing people's perspectives on time with their [health behaviors](#), the researchers also wanted to see what type of time perspective measurements are better at predicting health behaviors.

To answer both of these questions, Daugherty and Brase had subjects —

college students, with an average age of 19 years old — answer surveys about whether they think in the short term or the long term.

"College students tend to be more future-minded by definition because they go to college rather than get a job right out of high school," Brase said.

One survey asked [cognitive psychology](#) questions like "Would you prefer \$35 today or \$45 in 35 days?" The other surveys used two types of [social psychology](#) methods. These included having the subjects rate the extent to which they agree with statements like "I am willing to sacrifice my immediate happiness or well-being in order to achieve future outcomes."

The subjects then took surveys that asked questions like how often they ate breakfast, used tobacco and exercised, as well as their concerns with health risks like high cholesterol and contracting AIDS.

Daugherty and Brase found that the subjects who gave future-minded answers in the initial surveys were more likely to report healthy behaviors in the latter survey. They said this could have consequences for how people deal with negative health behaviors.

"There is a lot of potential for helping people make better health decisions," Brase said. "People who tend to have a very present-minded perspective will have an easier time following through with a change if they can see rewards sooner. So if somebody goes into a weight loss center, the clinicians could measure a client's time perspective. Then the clinicians would know the more effective way of helping the client reach his or her weight loss goal."

Daugherty said a present-minded person could be encouraged by emphasizing minimal investment now for a quick payoff in the near

future. He said it's similar to exercise equipment commercials that tout by exercising 20 minutes a day, several times a week, you will see immediate payoffs.

"You promote the idea that you have to do very little and you're going to see these great results," Daugherty said.

He and Brase also found that by asking social psychology questions to determine whether someone was future-minded or present-minded, the researchers were better able to predict subjects' health behaviors.

"On the academic side, we hope to provide psychologists with a better understanding of which of these measurements of time perspective are most useful," Brase said.

To continue the research, Daugherty and Brase will look at how present-mindedness and future-mindedness correlate with environmentally responsible behaviors like recycling.

"Environmentally responsible behaviors are not benefitting only you, and those payoffs are not necessarily reached next week or next month," Daugherty said. "If you exercise for a month, you're going to see some really immediate payoffs. If you recycle a few extra aluminum cans over a year, you don't see those benefits in the same way."

Provided by Kansas State University

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