

Our brains are confused about time

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Image by Sam Rohn, flickr.com/photos/nylocations/

(PhysOrg.com) -- A recent study published in the journal *Psychological Science* has found our concept of time is distorted, and we consistently underestimate how much time has passed since events in the past, condensing the time.

The researchers, led by Dr. Gal Zauberman, Associate Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, wondered why events that occurred at about the same [time](#) can feel more or less distant. Previous research had suggested that characteristics pertaining to the event itself could influence the time estimate, so Zauberman and his team decided to focus on the characteristics of the time interval following the event to see how they influenced the perception of time.

They tested university students to find out how accurately they could estimate when news events had occurred. Events included the appointment of US Federal Reserve chairman Ben S. Bernanke and

Britney Spears shaving her head. They found the students underestimated the time passed since the events by, on average, three months, and that the estimate depended on the extent of memories of related events that have occurred since. The more details students had of related events in the interval, the longer ago the event seemed to have occurred. Dr Zauberman said it seems that people have trouble understanding the passage of time, and we need to "latch onto something we do understand" in order to comprehend it.

This may explain, for example, why children we rarely see seem to grow up faster than those we see every day -- because there are fewer intervening memories -- and so the time seems condensed. It may also explain why goals that are not acted upon seem to have been made a short time ago, while those that were acted upon seem to have been made in the more distant past.

The research also suggests the sensation of passing time depends on what you think about and how, and this means that we actually have more control of our [perception](#) of time than previously thought, and focusing on our achievements rather than our lack of action on our goals makes time seem to have passed more slowly.

The paper, by Zauberman and colleagues Jonathan Levav, Kristin Diehl, and Rajesh Bhargave, was published in the December 2009 issue of the [Psychological Science](#) journal.

(Ben S. Bernanke was sworn in on February 1, 2006; Britney Spears shaved her head on February 16, 2007.)

More information: "1995 Feels So Close Yet So Far", Gal Zauberman et al., *Psychological Science*, [doi:10.1177/0956797609356420](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797609356420)

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