

People with 'balanced time perspective' more likely to call themselves content

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Do you look fondly at the past, enjoy yourself in the present, and strive for future goals? If you hold these time perspectives simultaneously—and don't go overboard on any one of them—you're likely to be a happy person.

A new study by San Francisco State University researcher Ryan Howell and his colleagues demonstrates that having this sort of "balanced time perspective" can make people feel more vital, more grateful, and more satisfied with their lives. Their findings are reported online in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

"If you are too extreme or rely too much on any one of these perspectives, it becomes detrimental, and you can get into very destructive types of behaviors," Howell said. "It is best to be balanced in your time perspectives."

While it may seem obvious that people who have a positive attitude about their past, enjoy the present, and focus on goals for the future would be the happiest, Howell said that a sense of well-being depends on the balance between these elements.

"If you're really dominant in one type of perspective, you're very limited in certain situations," he added. "To deal well when you walk into any situation, you need to have cognitive flexibility. That is probably why people with a balanced time perspective are happiest."

It can be fine to have fond memories of childhood, for instance, but spending too much time remembering the past can keep you from enjoying the present. It might be great to treat yourself to a nice dinner, but "living in the moment" like that every night could keep you from achieving future goals.

There is some evidence that people can "rebalance" their time perspectives, Howell said, while noting that "there hasn't been a lot of work that's tried to change time perspectives explicitly." But in general, "if you're too future-oriented, it might be good to give yourself a moment to sit back and enjoy the present," Howell suggested. "If you're too hedonistic and living for the moment, maybe it's time to start planning some future goals."

Howell directs The Personality and Well-Being Lab. He and his graduate students at SF State are collecting data on time perspectives through their Beyond the Purchase website at <http://www.beyondthepurchase.org>. They hope their results will help individuals to extend the benefits of a balanced time perspective into the area of consumer choice. The site contains a variety of short quizzes and surveys on purchasing habits and values and how they relate to happiness.

"The site is open to anyone who wants to learn more about their spending habits," Howell said, "and put themselves in a place where they can make better consumer choices."

"We would expect that people with certain time perspectives would be much more likely to make consumer choices that fall either in the more experiential or more materialistic side of things," said Howell, who is preparing a new study on the topic.

Provided by San Francisco State University

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