

No spoilers! Most people don't want to know their future

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Credit: Francisco Farias Jr/public domain

Given the chance to see into the future, most people would rather not

know what life has in store for them, even if they think those events could make them happy, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

"In Greek mythology, Cassandra, daughter of the king of Troy, had the power to foresee the future. But, she was also cursed and no one believed her prophecies," said the study's lead author, Gerd Gigerenzer, PhD, of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. "In our study, we've found that people would rather decline the powers that made Cassandra famous, in an effort to forgo the suffering that knowing the future may cause, avoid regret and also maintain the enjoyment of suspense that pleasurable events provide."

Two nationally representative studies involving more than 2,000 adults in Germany and Spain found that 85 to 90 percent of people would not want to know about upcoming negative events, and 40 to 70 percent preferred to remain ignorant of upcoming positive events. Only 1 percent of participants consistently wanted to know what the future held. The findings are published in the APA journal *Psychological Review*.

The researchers also found that people who prefer not to know the future are more risk averse and more frequently buy life and legal insurance than those who want to know the [future](#). This suggests that those who choose to be ignorant anticipate regret, Gigerenzer said. The length of time until an event would occur also played a role: Deliberate ignorance was more likely the nearer the event. For example, older adults were less likely than younger adults to want to know when they or their partner would die, and the cause of death.

Participants were asked about a large range of potential events, both positive and negative. For example, they were asked if they wanted to know who won a soccer game they had planned to watch later, what they were getting for Christmas, whether there is life after death and if their

marriage would eventually end in divorce. Finding out the sex of their unborn child was the only item in the survey where more people wanted to know than didn't, with only 37 percent of participants saying they wouldn't want to know.

Although [people](#) living in Germany and Spain vary in age, education and other important aspects, the pattern of deliberate ignorance was highly consistent across the two countries, according to the article, including its prevalence and predictability.

"Wanting to know appears to be the natural condition of humankind, and in no need of justification. People are not just invited but also often expected to participate in early detection for cancer screening or in regular health check-ups, to subject their unborn babies to dozens of prenatal genetic tests, or to use self-tracking health devices," said Gigerenzer . "Not wanting to know appears counterintuitive and may raise eyebrows, but deliberate ignorance, as we've shown here, doesn't just exist; it is a widespread state of mind."

More information: "Cassandra's Regret: The Psychology of Not Wanting to Know," by Gerd Gigerenzer, PhD, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and Rocio Garcia-Retamero, PhD, University of Granada, Spain. *Psychological Review*, March, Vol. 124, No. 2.

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