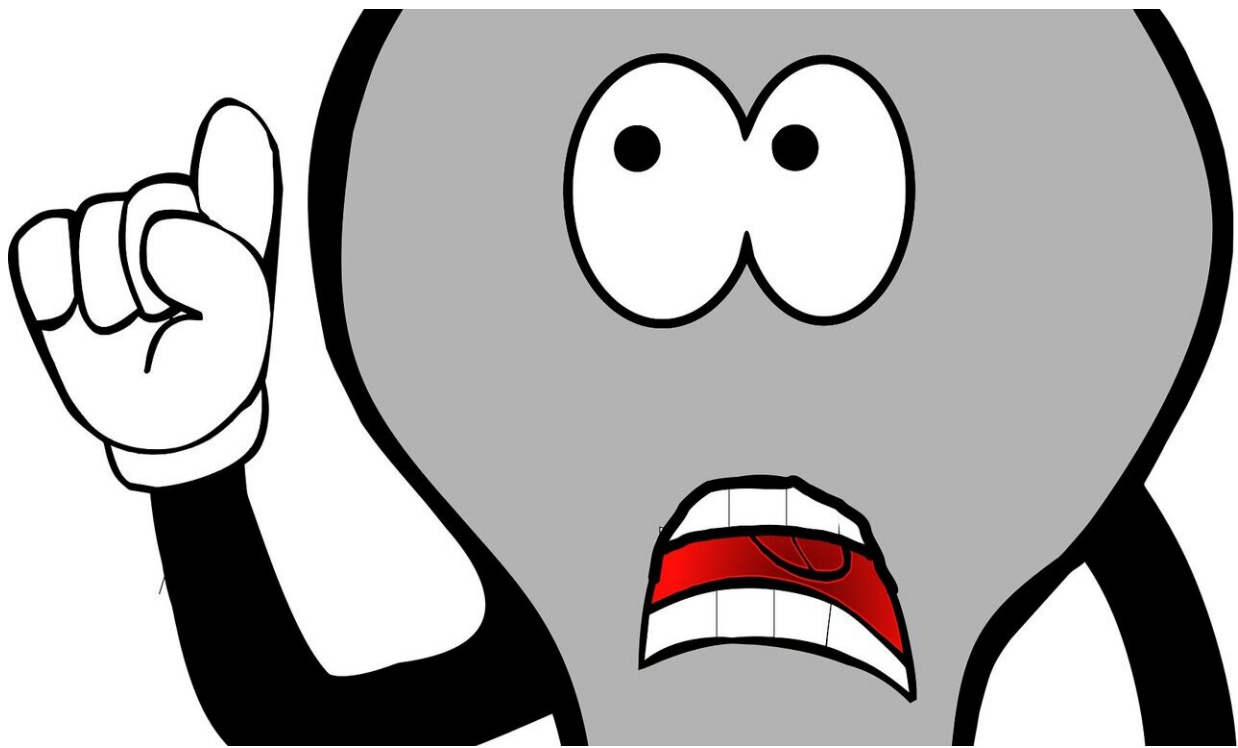


Get it over with, or procrastinate? New research explores our decision-making process

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When it's time to schedule a vacation, most people will do it right away. But when it comes to booking a root canal, some people will procrastinate while others will put it at the top of their to-do list.

New research from the UBC Sauder School of Business may have figured out why. The study, published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, reveals key insights into how excitement, anticipation and dread factor into people's decision-making.

"This stems from the phenomenon known as 'the sign effect'," says the study's author and UBC Sauder assistant professor, David Hardisty. "A person's desire to get positive things right away is stronger than their desire to put off negative ones. However, the timing of when a person wants to handle negative things is less obvious."

Hardisty and his team found that when people look toward positive events in the future, such as an upcoming vacation, they experience pleasure, but also impatience, which makes for a mixed [emotional experience](#).

When it comes to upcoming losses, however, the emotion tends to be all bad—even if that root canal is far away and life at this moment is good. So rather than postpone those negative events, many prefer to get them out of the way as soon as possible.

"When you're booking a vacation, you're vicariously enjoying the vacation, which is great, but you're also contrasting it with your current situation, which is bad. So you have that mix," says Hardisty. "And for losses, it's more of a unidimensional bad feeling. When you have a dentist's appointment coming up, you don't like thinking about the pain in the dental chair."

In one experiment, the researchers posted two advertisements on Facebook for [retirement planning](#): one ad read "Looking forward to [retirement benefits](#)?", and the other read "Worried about retirement expenses?" The click-through rate for this second ad, focused on reducing worry, was 43 per cent higher.

In a second experiment, to create controlled positive and [negative experiences](#), the researchers used jelly beans which come in flavours ranging from orange sherbet and watermelon to dirt and rotten egg. Participants were given the jelly beans to eat at different times, and rated how they felt about their upcoming gains—the good-tasting jelly beans—and losses (the bad ones).

Hardisty says some people procrastinate and put off [negative events](#), but not as much as many would expect, because the negative anticipation is so unpleasant. The researchers' findings also counter earlier research that argued people put off positive events so they can savour the sweet anticipation.

In a separate but related study, Hardisty's team looked at how people feel about past events, both positive and negative, because it removes the effects of anticipation. In other words, how do people feel about that root canal they had a month ago, or that relaxing vacation?

They found that remembering bad events feels bad, and remembering good events feels good, effectively wiping out the sign effect.

The more events recede into the past, adds Hardisty, the more muted our emotional responses to them become.

While the research provides a fascinating look at human behaviour, Hardisty says it also has plenty of practical applications when it comes to everything from contemplating car loans to mapping out retirement plans.

"It's exciting to have an explanation for why people make choices the way we do," he says. "Hopefully it will lead to better interventions that can help people make better long-term choices about their finances and other life events."

More information: David J. Hardisty et al, Impatience and Savoring vs. Dread: Asymmetries in Anticipation Explain Consumer Time Preferences for Positive vs. Negative Events, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1169](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1169)

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