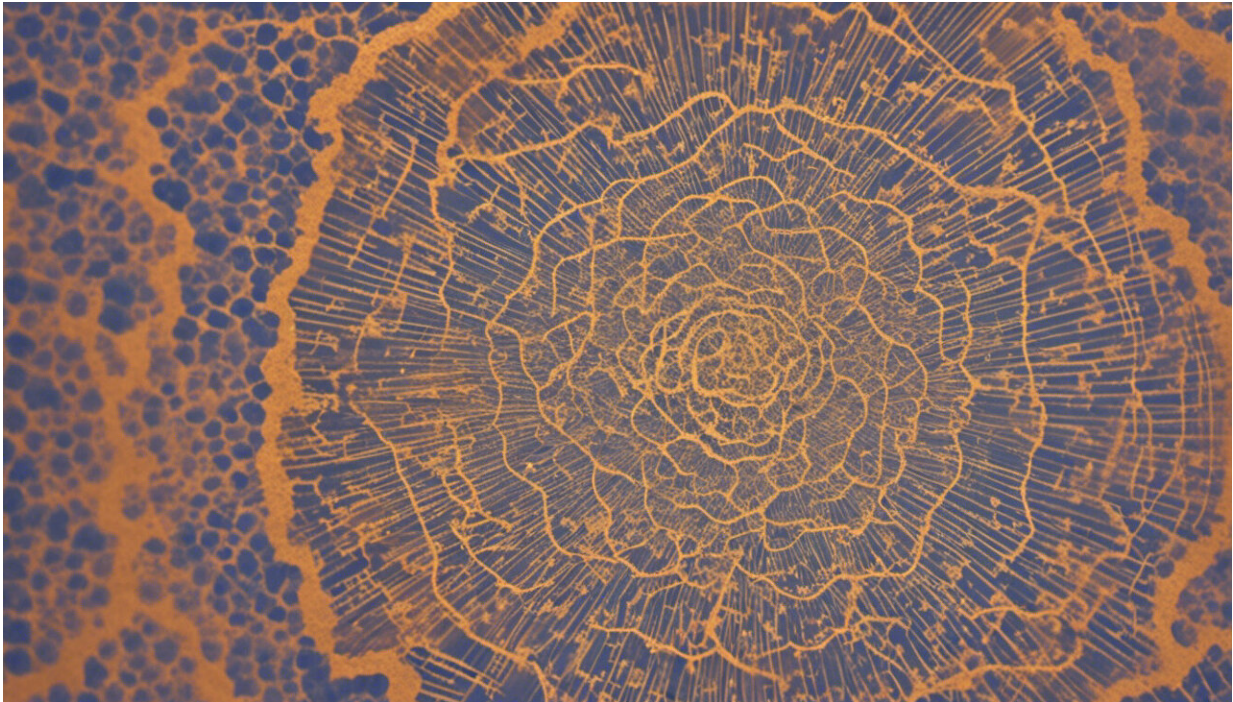# Patience could increase longevity

February 22 2022, by Lars Magnusson

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Patient people are at lower risk of dying before the age of 65 and suffer, on average, from fewer hospitalizations and diagnoses during their adult lives than more impatient individuals. In her dissertation in economics, Lisa Norrgren analyzes a unique data material where thousands of Swedes have been followed from the age of 13 and throughout their lives.

What would you prefer: Getting SEK 100 now or SEK 1,000 in five years? This was one of many questions that 13,000 youths aged 12–13 were asked in 1966, in a unique survey where the respondents were followed through life to this day. Your answer to the question says something about your time preferences, that is, how you value the present in relation to the future.

"There is really no bad or good alternative, it is just a matter of preferences—do you prefer to get something now or to wait for a bigger reward later," says Lisa Norrgren, who in her dissertation in economics at the School of Business, Economics and Law, examines the connection between time preferences, education, health and death.

20% greater chance of becoming 65

Her results show that the patient youths, who chose to receive SEK 1,000 in five years, have between a 17 and 21% greater chance of surviving their 65th birthday than their more impatient classmates. They are also admitted to hospital less frequently, receive fewer diagnoses as adults and are to a lesser extent diagnosed with so-called lifestyle diseases.

"When I investigate other factors that might explain the difference between the groups—such as gender, month of birth, age of father and mother, parents' income, parents' education, school absence, parental mortality, children's cognitive ability, municipality, education—it makes no major difference. Time preferences remain an important and stable factor," says Lisa Norrgren.

More likely to invest in their future health

One explanation to the results is that people who choose to receive SEK 1,000 in five years have a low discount rate, that is they believe that

immediate and future payments are about equally valuable, which makes them more likely to invest in better future health. On the other hand, a person with a high discount rate thinks that immediate outcomes are much more valuable than future ones. There are previous research results where time preferences play a role in such things as smoking or obesity, but this type of long-term study over a lifetime is unique.

"To die before the age of 65 is a very serious outcome, you disappear long before both you and your close relatives probably counted on. In order to tackle certain public health problems, one may need to take into account that impatient individuals are more exposed to health risks and create systems that focus on costs and rewards today instead of far into the future. One example is the labels on tobacco packages, which are mainly about the risk of cancer—perhaps it would be better to emphasize bad breath or that it is expensive to smoke," says Lisa Norrgren.

What it is that makes some people focus more on their future selves, or whether you can learn to be more patient is not entirely clear, according to Lisa Norrgren.

"In another study in the dissertation, we see that there is a connection between the children's and mothers' time preferences, but I cannot say if it is genetic or if you are socialized into it."

  More information: Carpe Diem or Seize your Health? The Economics of Time Preferences, Health, and Education.
gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/70095

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