Where Did the Time Go?

Take yourself back and imagine yourself coming home from school as a child. Maybe you had a snack, played outside with your friends, or watched a show with your siblings. What do you feel? We have these same moments as an adult: getting ready for bed, reading a book, or watching a movie, but, yet these moments don't seem as interesting or exciting as they did when we were children. Our childhood felt like a lifetime, but as an adult, it feels like we are passengers in our own lives with time passing us by. This is called the Holiday Paradox.

The Holiday Paradox

The Holiday Paradox was coined by a psychology writer, Claudia Hammond, and it refers to the idea that when we go on vacation for a week or two weeks, time is moving much quicker. But when we look back on our time spent on that vacation after it happened, it seems like that week or two weeks was much longer than it was. Scientists believe that this happens because when we are on vacation, we constantly experience new things and meet new people in a short period of time. This is because the experiences that we have on vacation are outside of our normal daily routine. Then, when we return to our ordinary lives, it feels like so much happened on that vacation due to that stimulation being gone. That's why you hear the saying, "time flies when you're having fun."

However, the Holiday Paradox does not just occur when we are on vacation; it also occurs when we are immersed in any exciting activity, such as a concert. When we're immersed in an activity, we don't check our watch or phones for the time, making it seem like time is moving much quicker than it actually is.

Our perception of time is deeply affected by our age and memory. Time impacts our memory, but memory also creates and shapes our experience of time. We're most likely to remember the timing of an event if the event is vivid and distinctive. Time perception matters because it is the experience of time that roots us in our mental reality. The mental reality of an adult passing through their daily routine is much duller than a child experiencing the world for the first time making new memories daily. We tend to find ourselves in a lot of novel situations after learning new skills through our childhood and early adulthood. Because of this, our early years tend to be over-represented in memory, making those years feel like they lasted much longer than our later years.

As we experience midlife shifts, such as losing our parents or going through a divorce, our lives tend to slow down again. These changes bring us to new experiences, which leads to us tapping into the same kind of mental experience that we had as children. We find ourselves looking for large moments, such as a marriage or job promotion, to get the same rush we got as children.

Immersion

Time doesn't just move faster when we're immersed in an exciting or new activity. Psychologists have been trying to answer the question "Where did the time go?" that many adults remark on. In 2005, psychologists Marc Wittmann and Sandra Lenhoff surveyed 499 participants from ages 14 to 94 years old about the pace they felt time moved at, ranging from "very slowly" to "very fast." For shorter durations, such as a week, month, or year, the participants' perception of time did not change with age. Most participants felt that time moved very quickly. But for longer durations, such as a decade, older adults tended to perceive time as moving faster. When asked to reflect on their lives, the participants older than 40 years old felt that their childhood moved very slowly but then time accelerated through their teenage years into early adulthood.

There are good reasons why older adults may feel this way. Our brain has a limited storage capacity, meaning that our brains encode new experiences into memory and tends to skip over

the more repetitive events in our lives. The more memories that we have, the more things we have to look back on, and the more things we can remember over a period of time, the longer we think that period of time is. This is why scientists encourage you to learn new skills, no matter how old you are. By learning new things, you give your brain a reason to absorb and store information, which, in turn, makes that moment last longer.

New experiences don't always have to be good for those moments to seem like they last longer. If you have ever experienced fear, you may have felt your life move in slow motion, leading to you questioning if it was really a few minutes or seconds that just passed by. This is because these moments cause cognitive reality shifts, making moments of fear feel like they last hours.

As we age, our world in general has sped up. When you look back on it, look at all of the changes in technology, society, our economy, and even our day-to-day lives because of all these other changes, as our world continue to speed up, we can feel those affects in our perceptions of time, causing us to feel that our lives are moving more quickly.

Proportionality Theory

Time speeds up as we get older if we consider the proportionality of time perception related to age. The older you are, the smaller one year is to you as a percentage of your life, so the years go faster and faster. A year feels faster at 40 years old than at 10 years old because 1 year constitutes much more time at 10 years old. To a 10-year-old, 1 year is 10% of their lives. To a 40-year-old, 1 year is only 2.5% of their life. If you add more years, it won't fly as fast. As lifespans increase, one year at the age of 50 will feel longer for someone with a lifespan of 150 years compared to someone with a lifespan of 100 years.

From a mathematical angle, this theory makes sense. However, critics argue that the proportionality theory ignores the role of attention, emotion, and novelty. Cognitive psychologists believe that it is the memories and vivid experiences that affect our perception of time, making our lives feel longer or shorter.

Time Perception for Children and Younger Adults

Children might perceive time more slowly than adults. There is evidence from a child's perspective that proves this to be true. A study was conducted where children, young adults, and middle-aged adults listened to specific tunes without the ability to look at the time. After the tune

was over, each participant was asked to identify the duration of time that passed throughout that tune. Researchers found that children perceived time much slower than young adults and middle-aged adults. This can explain why even those day-to-day tasks as a child seemed like they lasted forever, such as eating breakfast or getting dressed for the day. As an adult, those daily tasks seem to pass us by, leading us to question if we remember what we ate this morning. Children's perception of time is slower because memory, attention, and executive function are all under development. Children's neurotransmissions are slower than adults', but as adults, our neurotransmissions are fully developed so we have a better idea of actual time when compared to our perception of time.

The moments that we live in that don't form any new memories are those bits of time that escape us. Researchers have found that our experiences between the ages of 15 to 25 years old stick with us the most. This time of our lives is an era of nostalgia. This is when we have more new experiences than most other times in our lives, and many of these moments are some of the largest moments of our lives. During this time, we have our first job, our first relationships, our first home or apartment away from our parents, and the first time we can make our own choices in how we live our lives. These moments are some of the most memorable moments of our lives, making time seem like it was moving very slowly when we look back on those times in our later years.

How to Slow Down Our Lives Again

- Find new ways to create memories
- Look for novel experiences that engage your brain
- Challenge yourself to learn new skills
- Meet new people
- Try to remember your day as vividly as possible

As we all know, time is immovable, a matter of fact. We cannot adjust the clock, the minute, or the second, but we can adjust the way we perceive the time that is passing us by.

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