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Short on time, long on feeling: Study suggests deadlines intensify emotions

Amateur observers and scholars alike have remarked that older people often have more intense and complex emotional lives than their younger cohort. What accounts for the difference, wondered psychologist Ursina Teuscher: Wisdom gained with the gathering years? A shift in values thanks to greater life experience? Or, is it a keener sense of time – a precious and, of necessity, diminishing resource?

To test the notion that time limits and approaching endings add fuel to feelings, Teuscher, a post-doctoral researcher in the cognitive science department of the University of California, San Diego, asked 165 young subjects to imagine themselves in several different scenarios.

Half of the scenarios included an explicit "limited-future" condition, such as the last day of a holiday. The other half differed only in that they made no mention of the future at all. The subjects, whose mean age was 20.68 years, were asked to read the scenarios and then indicate how intensely (on a scale of 1 to 5) they would experience 31 different emotions.

"Given time limits, people showed more extreme emotions – on both the positive and negative ends of the scale," Teuscher said. "The test results suggest that a different time perspective itself can cause differences in emotional complexity and intensity."

In one experimental scenario, for example, half the participants were asked to picture an evening spent at a close colleague's home. The colleague is a very bad cook and burns the dinner. A dessert made and brought by the participant is not much better: It's dry and not at all what was planned. Nonetheless, the two have "a cheerful evening and chat until late into the night." The other half of the participants considered the same story in light of additional information that they would be retiring next week and moving to another city. Compared to the open-ended group, the time-limited subjects reported for this scenario that they would feel more closeness, more patience, more respect, more sadness and less irritation.

The findings, presented at the American Psychological Society annual convention in Los Angeles, May 26-29, may have broad implications, Teuscher said, "in the study of how people cope with endings and transitions, not only death but also separations, migration, job changes or retirement – in short, any critical life event requiring people to deal with the foreseeable end of a situation."

Teuscher is also conducting research to see how a time-limited perspective affects decisions: Do people choose something different if they think they're choosing for the last time?

In an experiment involving book and movie selections, young subjects faced with a hypothetical limit on the future tended to go for familiar materials over reading or seeing something new. In other words, they made choices similar to those made by older individuals (as observed by other researchers).

"The salience of an approaching ending is a potentially powerful variable that has so far received little attention," Teuscher said. "It would be worthy of further investigation both in the fields of life-span development and decision-making."

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