

COVID time and living in the present



It's hard to believe, but just over a year ago we were out and about coughing with abandon, enthusiastically clapping germ-ridden hands, sitting cheek by jowl with strangers on terraces and in cinemas, and jetting off in glorified tin cans with other people's exhalations as our sweet, sweet inhalations without a mask, sanitising gel or a disposable glove in sight. Ah, the beforetimes...

But all these actions did more than just put us in mortal danger – sorry, that was my inside voice – I mean, entertain us; they provided structure to our days, weeks and months. And without them, our perception of time has also changed. The time according to our clocks or more likely our phones and computers is still the same, so why has the removal of these routines affected our experience of it? Good question, glad you asked it.

An article in the *New Scientist* seems to point the way. Neuroscientists refer to two forms of time – 'clock time' and 'subjective time'. Clock time – how do we break the code for this term? Well, it's basically linear sequential time as shown on a clock, whereas subjective time is how we emotionally perceive clock time. And having spent two years of my studies many moons ago pulverising rat brains in a neuroscience lab to make what looked like tiny strawberry frozen margheritas for a rodent shindig, I tend to agree with them – it felt like six years.

COVID time

So without our simple routines, such as leaving the house to go to work Monday to Friday, what anthropologists call our 'temporal agency' – our ability to structure our time – has been removed. And the thing is, we need the temporal inputs embedded in these routines to help contextualise our world and to tailor our responses to it. I read a tweet last year that bemoaned the loss of days of the week underwear for adults as they helped us figure out which day it was. That's where millions of years of evolution have gotten us, ladies and gentlemen, being unable to remember what day it is unless it's printed on our smalls.

This need for temporal agency was borne out by a UK study published in *PLoS One* in July 2020, which indicated that 80% of participants studied perceived time as passing more slowly or more quickly than usual during lockdown. The difference is in our emotional perception of time, which is tied up with our memories of past events and their length (e.g. 'those childhood summers seemed to go on for ever' – they blatantly didn't or I'd still be shinning up trees or squashed in a rusty barrel being rolled down a hill at great speed), and how we judge the

duration of an event in the present. Temporal structures such as going to work, meeting friends for lunch or going to the cinema help us assess time's duration. And as our usual temporal inputs, routines and structures have changed, we find it difficult to perceive time accurately – hence, COVID time.

So what can we do to counterbalance this?

We can combat sea sickness by focusing on a point on the horizon and minimising our sensory input so our brains can sync with our eyes. Well, COVID time is basically 'timesickness' and we can 'trick' time by creating new routines. The good news is that as this past year has shown, we can create new structures in our lives that alleviate this difficulty in time perception. Going for a morning walk, cooking lunch at home, having Zoom calls with friends or family or baking a cake at the weekend, these all mark the passage of time. Incorporate some small routines into your life and it will help.

We can also ground ourselves in simple ways to build our resilience:

1. **Be present in the moment:** Don't waste your energy ruminating on the past or the future. Focus on the now.
 - a. Practise mindfulness or meditation – use one of the many online courses or see the *New York Times*' suggestions for the best meditation apps.
 - b. Practise yoga – again there are many free classes online, see these suggestions.
 - c. Connect with nature – go for a walk, run or cycle, and focus on the sensations around you, and on what your body is experiencing rather than being lost in the thoughts in your brain.
2. **Practise self-care:** To quote Ice Cube, 'check yourself before you wreck yourself', a bit bleak but the message is good. Sleep well, eat well and check in with how you're doing at least three times a day. As noted in a *Huffington Post* article, psychologists have proven that naming your emotions alleviates the intensity of the anxiety experienced. You can write down your answer to 'How am I doing?' and alley-oop, no more tears as the baby shampoo turned vaccine manufacturer used to promise.
3. **Build your social network:** No, not the Zuckerberg one. I'm talking about finding your Squad. More AOC and Ilhan Omar, and less Police Squad. Think of who you can rely on when the chips are down. Who energises rather than drains you? The former are in your Squad, the latter should be in a squad car.



4. **Have fun:** Do things that make you laugh. How about listening to some podcasts? Or watching a comedy? Having a call with a friend or loved one? Whatever it is that makes you laugh, do it, as long as you're not a laughing hitman or something, then don't do it! The Mayo Clinic recommends laughter for short- and long-term health benefits, including improving your immune system, mood and personal satisfaction. I laugh in the face of your assertions Mayo Clinic. And whaddya know? You're right, I do feel much better.

For a quick pick me up, there's always You Tube, these two clips being recent favourites: Border Collie enthusiastically watches herself win agility competition on TV and hamster slap.

5. **Move:** During the day, stand up and stretch for 5-10 minutes each hour. And remember to go outside to remind your body that you are not just a brain perched on some primordial gloom, you have a body and nab it! And that body needs to be let out into the wild! Or at least onto the street. A 2019 study published in Nature suggested that no more than two hours per week of being outdoors had benefits, but just try 10-15 minutes a day and build from there.

And remember, make the most of what you have, be kind to yourself and live your life with the wanton abandon of Kirk the Border collie.

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