Giving Time Gives You More Time

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Refusals to help are often rationalized by lack of time. We explore this association in reverse, showing across multiple experiments that people who spend time on others subsequently feel they have more free time, and that the future is long and full of possibilities.

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reported reduced impatience and a greater willingness to volunteer time. Finally, a mediation analysis determined awe’s influence on time donation was driven by its influence on time perception: Awe (versus happiness) reduced impatience, which in turn increased willingness to donate time. Importantly, the awe and happiness conditions did not differ in willingness to donate money (a non-temporal form of prosociality), ruling out the alternative explanation that awe simply increases all prosociality.

Experiment 3 tested whether awe influences well-being and consumption decisions via expanding time. To elicit emotions (awe versus neutral), participants read stories depicting prototypical elicitors of the target emotion (Griskevicius, Shiotai, & Neufeld, 2010). Participants subsequently reported their feelings of impatience, momentary life satisfaction, hypothetical choices between experiential versus material goods, and current emotions. A manipulation check confirmed awe (versus neutral) condition participants experienced more awe. ANOVAs then revealed awe (versus neutral) condition participants reported reduced impatience, greater life satisfaction, and preferred more experiential (versus material) goods. Mediation analyses determined awe’s influence on life satisfaction and experimental (versus material) choices was driven by its influence on time perception: Awe (versus neutral feelings) reduced impatience, which in turn increased life satisfaction and preferences for experiential goods.

In sum, awe increased willingness to volunteer time, preferences for experiential goods, and life satisfaction, all through expanding perceptions of time. Thus, awe-eliciting experiences might offer an effective solution to the feelings of time starvation that plague consumers in modern society.

REFERENCES


Giving Time Gives You More Time

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many of us feel we are victims of a “time famine” (Perlow 1999), having too much to do and not enough time to do it. For example, parents are spending both more time working and more time with their children, yet still feel they are falling short (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2007)...if only there were a few more hours in a day. Given that our time is objectively constrained by a 24 hour day, and ultimately mortality, one important question is whether there are ways to feel like we have more time. We examine one way in which doing more can result in feeling less busy. In a series of experiments, we find that giving time to another person counteracts the time famine, making time feel more expansive and the future full of possibilities.

Volunteering time can benefit givers in multiple ways, from reducing depression (Musick and Wilson 2003), to improving physical health (Thoits and Hewitt 2001), to delaying death (Oman, Thoresen, and McMahon 1999). Giving support to others lessens anxiety over
one’s own troubles (Krause 1986) and giving a massage can lower stress even more than receiving one (Field et al. 1998). In short, volunteering can make people healthier and happier. But no studies have yet explored the effect of giving time on time perceptions. One might expect that since adding obligations reduces the time available for other things, any additional activities, including volunteering, would amplify time-related stress. We anticipate the reverse outcome for two reasons: if giving time is meaningful, it could encourage a long-term perspective; also, precisely because donating time is indicative of a surplus of time and energy, one might infer such a surplus even when volunteering is obligatory.

In our first study, participants spent five minutes either giving time or wasting time, and then answered a series of time perception questions. Those in the giving time condition selected one of four gravely ill children, read a short biography written by the child’s mother, then wrote a letter to that child—which we subsequently mailed. Those in the wasting time condition counted the “e”s in a long passage of nonsense text. Our dependent variable was endorsement of the time-focused statements from Carstensen and Lang’s (1996) Future Time Perspective scale (e.g. “Most of my life lies ahead of me”). Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that individuals who had given time felt they had more time than did those who had wasted it.

Study 2 was conducted in two parts. In the morning, participants completed an online, between-subjects questionnaire which included instructions to either spend time doing something for themselves or for any other person at some point during the day. We gave no further directions regarding how this time should be spent. In the evening, participants completed a follow-up survey asking how they had spent their time, how much time they had spent, and how they felt about it, as well as measuring future outlook. We found that regardless of the amount of time spent, those who gave time to another person felt that they had more time in general than those who spent time on themselves. They also reported the experience was less relaxing and enjoyable, but more meaningful and loving. These findings suggest that experiences which reduce time-related anxiety do not necessarily need to feel relaxing or fun. Additionally, those who gave time to someone else were more inclined to say it didn’t feel like much time at all. This result dovetails with our finding that they also reported that the future feels longer—if you have plenty of time ahead of you, then an hour isn’t much at all.

In a follow-up study, we asked participants to remember a previous instance in which they had spent time doing something for someone else or for themselves. As our dependent variable, we used a resource slack measure (Zauberman and Lynch 2005) of perceived free time. We found that, consistent with our previous results, those who remembered investing an hour or two felt they had more free time if they recalled time spent on another. However, those who remembered investing months or years (e.g. going to college or caring for a sick relative) reported having more free time after remembering something they had done for themselves. We confirm in this experiment that spending time on others can increase the amount of time you feel you have available, but that this effect is limited to small amounts of leisure time, rather than major volunteer commitments which constrain other important obligations and pursuits.

In our next study, we tested the boundaries of our effect by comparing giving time to getting time, and we explored a behavioral consequence of subjective time abundance. In this experiment, participants either gave ten minutes (editing a high school student’s senior essay) or received 10 minutes (leaving the lab early). We then asked how much time they might want to devote to participating in future studies, and we followed up by measuring actual time spent.

Those in the giving time condition reported having more spare time, intended to participate in more future surveys, and were marginally more likely to actually spend more time on surveys a week later. In a follow-up study, we showed the cyclical nature of the volunteering/busy-ness relationship. We first asked participants to complete a writing exercise that primed being busy or not being busy. Next, we offered them the opportunity to leave early or to spend fifteen minutes editing an essay, as in the previous experiment. Those who had been primed with being busy were less likely to give time to help someone else.

In sum, we find that spending time on another person can make one’s life feel less busy, and that feeling less busy increases the likelihood of helping out. The converse is true as well: when feeling the pressure of a time famine, we are less likely to engage in socially supportive activities that could alleviate this stress.

REFERENCES

Proximity to a Goal and Time Slack

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Zauberman and Lynch (2005) showed that people tend to say “Yes” to attractive opportunities in the distant future that they would say “No” to if the same activity had to be performed today or tomorrow. The present research seeks to understand what drives an individual’s different perceptions of time slack (“spare time”) in the near and distant future.

People believe that today they are exceptionally busy but that they will be less busy in the more distant future. Zauberman and Lynch (2005) speculated that this illusion that one will be less busy in the future than today might arise because people have formed goals for the use of their time in the very near but not the more dis-