

Why Time Speeds Up as We Get Older (And What We Can Do About It)

Time seems to go faster as we age. When we were children, the school year and then the summer seemed to stretch forever. As adults, we wonder where the time went.

Duke University engineering professor [Adrian Bejan believes](#) he can explain this universal phenomenon. Bejan found as we age our ability to process mental images slows. Bejan observes, "The human mind senses time changing when the perceived images change." Thus, according to Bejan, "Days seemed to last longer in your youth because the young mind receives more images during one day than the same mind in old age."

An adult processes images slower and perceives less is happening in a day, so days seem shorter, time passes quickly.

[Bejan observes](#): "It's not that [our youthful] experiences were much deeper or more meaningful, it's just that they were being processed in rapid fire."

When you spend time around children, Professor Bejan's research seems to be spot on. Once my children spotted fake owls set in the high rafters of a covered walkway to keep birds from nesting. I'd taken that walk many times, not seeing the owls. They saw it the first time.

Yet, Professor Bejan may be missing something fundamental. Does the ability to process images slow because of physical limits inherent in aging or because of ingrained mental habits that coincide with aging? If time is going by faster because of a mental habit, perhaps we can change our habit and slow our perceived passage of time.

In the delightful comedy [About Time](#), Domhnall Gleeson plays Tim, a young man who comes from a family whose male members can time travel.

Initially, Tim uses time travel to return to particular days to intentionally alter events. Later in the movie, Tim's father, played by Bill Nighy, advises Tim to use time travel only to relive the same day, not by altering events, but by being more present. Tim's father counsels, "Live every day again almost exactly the same, the first time with all the tensions and worries that stop us from noticing how sweet the world can be, but the second time noticing."

As Tim follows his father's advice, he notices how for ordinary events of life he is not present at all. Commuting to work and buying his lunch are colorless events. Tim is a lawyer; even a victory in the courtroom is a muted experience when he is not mentally present.

Tim learns to bring peace to life's moments rather than expecting life to bring peace to him. He stops time traveling. Instead, Tim explains, "I just try to live every day as if I've deliberately come back to this one day. To enjoy it as if it was the final day of my extraordinary, ordinary life."

What about us non-time-travelers?

Have you ever noticed an aging relative who tells the same tedious story over and over again? But what about our own dull story? Let's call our stories, the "story of me." These stories, not aging, clog our mental bandwidth so fewer events are noticed.

The story of me is the inner voice that offers a running narration on our experience—like the director's voiceover commentary on a DVD as the movie plays. This inner voice offers opinions on everything. In less than a second, [instant judgments are formed](#) about everyone we meet. It instructs us on what we need more of and what we need less of, what makes

us happy and what makes us sad.

This story of me presents each moment as if it is relating events with the accuracy of a camera. As we age, the story of me gets bigger. The more engrained the story, the more the story filters out as irrelevant anything that contradicts its tedious tale. Rather than providing a bird's-eye view of life, our story provides a worm's-eye view.

Through this worm's-eye view we experience grievances based on what has happened in the past; a past we believed we have stored accurately in our brain. Yet, [neuroscientists have learned](#) that remembering "isn't just an act of retrieval, but of reconstruction." We build memories "from scratch each and every time."

Long-standing grievances, carried around for many years, are built on sand. If we do not rehearse and rebuild them every day, the tide of the present moment will wash them away.

No wonder the days seem shorter. Rehearsing and rebuilding memories leaves little mental bandwidth to immerse ourselves in the moment and stretch our experiences of life.

We can't will ourselves into present moment awareness. Yet, we can see how the story of me with its endless reconstruction of past events is keeping us from the present.

You can do your own simple "about time" experiment. Look at an old family photograph. You can probably remember the events of that day. When the photograph was taken, you may have been caught up in the concerns of the day. These concerns clouded what was there and prevented a full enjoyment of the moment. As you look at the photograph, drop your story. Dropping your story, you might experience an overwhelming feeling of Love. Love was the real backdrop of that moment.

Some days, the cloud cover generated by the story of me is dense; but Love is always there, giving its gifts. Why wait

for the future to open the gifts of Love available to us today?

When we experience life through the story of me, we will experience what Professor Bejan describes—time rushing by as we get older.

We are subject to a higher law than Prof. Bejan's—the law of Love. By dropping the story of me, we make mental space to experience life; Love will rush in on our welcome. Then, as in our youth, time will seem to stretch forever.

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