

When does the future begin? A study in maximising motivation

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The answer to the question ‘When does the future begin?’ – which, by the way, is *not right now* – matters because humans are attuned to focus on the ‘right now’ situation. This is not a flaw. Failure to focus on the opportunities and obstacles in the moment can be dangerous. From an evolutionary perspective, humans around today all descended from ancestors who paid attention in the moment, and hence, didn’t become meals for any predator straying into their path while pondering future goals.

At the same time, the future *is* often on our minds. Much of everyday life has meaning in large part because of what the present implies for the self one might become. Homework is meaningful as a step toward a future self, otherwise it would be mostly a chore to be shirked. Getting good grades, staying healthy, or saving for retirement typically require acting in the present and continuing to act over time. What we need to keep going in the face of adversity is to make the future self feel it is in the here-and-now, connected rather than irrelevant to the present self, permitting us to keep

going in the face of adversity.

In a series of experiments and in a school-based brief intervention, my lab has shown that our sense of where the future begins can, in fact, be altered to enhance what we call 'identity-based motivation'. The future can be made to feel relevant and part of

one's current self. Crucially, once activated, this malleable sense of the future can produce changes in behaviour both immediately and over time.

To do our study, we initially worked with low-income, minority middle-school students, dividing them into a test group and a control group. Students in the intervention part of the study participated in small group activities that required them to consider their academic identities and strategies. These present-day identities and strategies were linked to those of the following year's, and to adult identities too. Students in the control group went to school as usual, experienced the usual difficulties with schoolwork, and thought about their futures when and how they would naturally, without structured intervention.

Prior to intervention, the two groups did not differ on any of the measures we reviewed: grades, attendance, homework completion and behaviour. After the 12-week intervention, however, the test group taught to integrate thoughts of the future with the now had improved grades, spent more time on their homework, had better attendance, and achieved higher standardised test scores. We found that students taught to experience their adult future self as close and connected to their current self had higher levels of achievement. They came to view difficulties as important rather than impossible, and to see schoolwork in terms of advancing their lives.

Follow-up studies with university students demonstrated the same thing. Here, students were guided through a visualisation. Some were asked to think of themselves in the context of a university that enabled students to obtain the majors, grades and outcomes they desired; others were asked to imagine a university that set up students for frustration and failure. Later, students were randomly asked to consider the desirable or undesirable versions of their future selves. As predicted, creating a relationship between context and possible future identities mattered. Students were more focused on studying and schoolwork, and saw difficulty in schoolwork as elements along the road to success, if they were guided to consider their best possible identities in the most favourable university setting.

In another group of studies, we had college students imagine their future self four years hence, with things having gone as well as they possibly could, either academically or socially. Then we had them write down what they imagined on a sheet of paper. Some of those sheets were pre-printed with an illustration of containers or an illustration of a path; other sheets had no illustration at all. We found that when students imagined their desired academic future self and wrote about it on a page illustrated with a path, they studied more, were more likely to ask for help, and got

better grades on the next quiz.

Imagining a path from the present self to a future self evokes the sense of a real journey. People walk on paths, a concrete action, while the future is abstract, its needs and requirements unclear. When we had students write about their future self on a

path, the positive effect of that imagery in terms of actual success in school was strong.

But why were positive effects on academics found only for participants who imagined their potential selves in the context of a path? We hypothesised that the benefit came from what we know about journeys and paths. Indeed, we found that participants reported feeling more certain about knowing how to take a journey, rather than knowing how to plan for their futures.

We also found that imagery involving personal agency was key. To reach that conclusion, we gave some students sheets of paper showing a person walking on a path and others depicting a train going down a track. The ‘walkers’ showed benefit but for those asked to visualise the passive experience of ‘taking the college train’, the effect disappeared.

Most recently, we asked if making the future self feel connected to the current self would trigger action on even more distant goals – such as saving for retirement. First, we asked college students and non-student adults to imagine themselves in each of three situations: preparing for a birthday, saving for a wedding, and preparing for a work presentation (or, for students, a midterm). At the end of each scenario, participants were asked to write when the event would occur on a blank space. Half of the time, the blank space was followed by a smaller time unit, and half the time by a larger time unit. So, for birthday preparations, half the people answered in terms of days and half answered in terms of months. For weddings, half answered in terms of months and half in terms of years.

These studies show that people experience a future that they are preparing for as closer when they think of it in smaller time units. We also studied the reverse situation: when the timing of a future event is clear but what’s not clear is when to start preparing for it. We tested three different scenarios: saving for your newborn’s college education in 18 years, saving for your own retirement in 30 years, or saving for your own retirement in 40 years. Again, we found that thinking in days made people feel closer to their future self and less likely to feel that their current and future selves were really not the same person. This translated into more willingness to provide for that future self.

People planned to start saving for their child’s college education more than a year later when thinking in years rather than in days, and for their own retirement two to 2.5 years later when thinking in days. On average, people started four times sooner

when thinking in days rather than years.

This is important because, though plans do not always work out, people tend to underestimate the value of compound interest. Those extra years matter not for how much money is put in, but for the added time to compound.

Across studies, the answer is clear: even though the future starts later, the way to succeed is to make the future feel connected to the present, thus requiring immediate and persistent action.

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