

KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH TIME WELL SPENT

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
– TS Eliot, Burnt Norton

Time is a continuous, objectively measurable forward movement. We measure it with the rotation of the earth, the orbit of the earth about the sun, and the tilt of her axis relative to that sun as we make our way about it, seen through the changing seasons.

While the mechanics of time in a basic way are well understood, our *experience* of time and our relationship to time is complex, and can hold the key to our experience of life itself.

Phil Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus of Stanford and author of “The Time Cure,” (famous also for the *Stanford Prison Experiment*, a classic study in our susceptibility to the abuse of power), describes 6 different time orientations:

- Past-positive – you’re happy about the past events of your life, focusing on the positive
- Past-negative – you regret, dwell on and exaggerate the painful events of your past
- Present hedonism – you enjoy and seek pleasure in the present
- Present fatalism – you’re passive about the present, feeling that events are not in your control
- Goal-oriented future – make plans and seek to actively accomplish things to better your life
- Transcendental future – you seek to be good in this life seeking to be rewarded after death

Our happiness is dependent to a large degree on our relationship to these 6 different time orientations (you can

take the *Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory* [here](#)).

A high level of past negative and present fatalism will lead to the worst experience. As Zimbardo says, “These people are living in a negative past and think nothing they do can change it.” This is the orientation that is common with severe depression and trauma. The good news is we can change this orientation, and doing so can have a tremendous positive effect on those symptoms.

Our relationship to our past has a huge effect on our experience of life, and our expectations of the future. It is also a high leverage point for changing our experience; because while the past has already happened and cannot be changed, it is what we choose to focus on in our past and the meaning we make of it that affects us the most – often more than the actual events themselves.

The truth is, our memory of the actual events of the past as they unfolded objectively is extremely unreliable. Rather, we remember very selectively, according to habit and expectation, and we tend to imbue those events with meanings or interpretations that may or may not have been accurate to begin with.

A therapist friend of mine years ago had a memory that he went back to – over and over and over.... His father was dying, and, as a young boy, my friend had come into the room; at which point his father said, “Get him out of here!” My friend took this to mean that his father hated him, and didn’t want to see him.

I can understand how that could be his interpretation, especially as a young, frightened and confused young boy. But was that really what his father was intending? Or did he mean to protect his son from seeing something awful? Or might he have wanted his son to remember him in another way? Perhaps his anger was directed towards the adults who allowed his son to come in?

We don’t have any way of knowing, of course... and neither did my friend. Yet as an adult he chose to hold on to and dwell on the worst possible interpretation of that event, and in many ways that interpretation came to define his self-concept. But the truth is it was his *interpretation* of the event, more than the event itself, which was hurting him.

We know this because when people change their painful interpretation of such things, their experience also changes, and they generally feel happier, stronger, and more resilient than they did when they were holding on to the negative meaning. This is not to deny anything we may have suffered through in our past, but to appreciate how our interpretation can lead to deeper and prolonged suffering.

The prescription for a negatively experienced past is twofold: search for the positive experiences that you haven’t appreciated; and seek to reframe the negative ones.

How we deal with our past is particularly important because there is so much we can do with our relation with it. But our relation to the present and future are important, too.

We want to avoid *present fatalism*. The thought that there’s nothing we can do about events now is a helpless stance; so present fatalism is a recipe for depression and anxiety. Though we don’t want to have our *total* focus in life on momentary pleasures (there’s a future to think of too, you know), a degree of pleasure and enjoyment in the present is very important.

The present is where we live, after all! It’s where we enjoy the company of family and friends, the beauty of a sunrise, the delight of a moment, the absorption of total focus, or the thrill of a triumph.

As to the future, regardless of your faith, it is important to have goals that we aim for. Making plans for the future we can look forward to and work towards keeps us in an active, purposeful stance toward life, and that

active purposeful stance is what propels us forward, creating movement, direction and meaning.

A positive relationship with our past, and an active, engaged relationship with our present and future are what make for a happier life. Search for the positive treasures of the past, savor the love, challenges, and joy in the present, and plan well for the future. These are the keys to time well spent, and a life well lived.

PS: *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible; and my new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you grow a deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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