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[Wellness](#)

## Pandemic got you down? Psychologists suggest time travel — sort of.



By Galadriel Watson

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*Dear [insert your name]. Living through the pandemic wasn't fun, but you got through it. Now, two years later, your children are flourishing, your relationship is blooming — and what a great vacation you recently had! You've learned to cherish outings with friends and never take a visit with family for granted. After bouncing around a bit, your career has hit its "new normal" stride. Sure, there have been ups and downs. Adjusting has been slow. But ultimately, you and your loved ones are good. I promise. From, your future self.*

Wouldn't it be nice if we could peek into the future to reassure ourselves? That's not actually possible, but there is a psychological technique for regulating emotions that employs this idea. It's called "temporal distancing," and you can think of it as mental time travel. If the concept sounds familiar, it's a bit like reminding yourself of the ancient adage "this, too, shall pass." I consulted three experts about how to do it and why it works.

## **Trapped in the moment**

Right now, you may find many things upsetting: You might be Zoomed out, missing your friends or mourning lost loved ones. "You're really in the moment," says Anne Wilson, a psychology professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. "You're living whatever's negative and distressing."

Temporal distancing is a way to "step outside of the unpleasant, immersed moment," she says. To do this, imagine yourself in a later moment in time. A year from now, for example, we probably won't still be living through the pandemic. By then, it will be mostly behind us, though much about society will have changed, and you'll have a different perspective about it than you do now. "Thinking about ways things can get better — and that things will change, you will grow, you will learn from something that's even unpleasant — can often give you a sense of optimism and hope," Wilson says.

By picturing yourself *then*, you'll feel better *now*.

## **When there's an end in sight**

The pandemic is the perfect occasion to use this strategy. "We know that there is light at the end of the tunnel," says Saz Ahmed, a postdoctoral research associate at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London. People are receiving [coronavirus](#) vaccines. Health experts are offering guidance for gradual deconfinement. Because of this aspect of hope, now is a good time to go about "reinterpreting the situation in order to make ourselves feel less negative about it," she says.

Temporal distancing can also be used for non-pandemic issues. If you find yourself in a predicament such as failing an exam or fighting with a friend, give it a try. A relationship ending or filing for bankruptcy can cause great distress and disruption in the short term, but the hardship will probably decrease. So, although bombing a job interview is upsetting at the time, "when you think of it five years down the line," Ahmed says, "you'd probably even forget about it."

## **How to do it**

Projecting yourself into the future isn't difficult for most people. "A lot of people intuitively do this," says Ozlem Ayduk, a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a co-director of its Relationships and Social Cognition Lab. "It's not this strange, weird strategy that we're trying to teach people." In a recent study, which is in the process of being peer reviewed, she found that many Americans are already using temporal distancing to cope with the pandemic.

The instructions? “It’s very simple,” she says. Imagine yourself being in the future and looking back on today. How will this future self feel about the current distress you’re going through? Will you still be upset? Or will you have moved on? How have things changed? What lessons have you learned? Have your hopes for the future come true?

You can also write down your thoughts, as noted at the beginning of this article. Wilson co-authored a [study](#), published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, in which nearly 740 Japanese adults wrote letters to themselves about the pandemic in April 2020. Sometimes, they imagined they were their future selves and wrote to their present selves. Sometimes, they remained their present selves and wrote to their future selves. Either way, the participants reported that their moods improved.

“In many cases, part of what their future self was doing was writing a supportive letter to the present,” Wilson says, with thoughts such as, *You can do this*, or, *You’re going to get through this*. “In the same way that we can benefit from encouragement from a friend, we can also benefit from self-talk encouragement.”

How far into the future should you look? Ayduk considered this question in one of her [studies](#), which focused on nearly 700 undergraduate students. She found that the participants who imagined themselves 10 years into the future rated themselves as having lowered their distress more effectively than those who imagined themselves only one week into the future. Ahmed conducted a similar [study](#), published in 2017, which allowed 83 participants, ages 12 to 22, to choose how far into the future they wanted to project themselves. The findings demonstrated that they “were more successful at regulating their emotions the further in time they thought of,” she says.

Yes, as Ahmed’s study shows, the technique appears to work for teenagers, too. One way parents could encourage their children to try it would be to ask them to think about something upsetting that happened in the past. Parents could then prompt their teens by asking: “How do you feel about that now? Are you still upset, or do you feel fine about it?” This exercise could help teens realize that “what you’re going through now will also pass,” Ahmed says.

### **Beneficial for many — but not all**

Younger children, however, are another matter when it comes to temporal distancing. “They typically go for the immediate reward,” Ahmed says. “So, it may not work as well for children, because they find it more difficult to think of the future, and they prioritize the present.”

In addition, people who suffer from anxiety or other mental health issues may not be able to see the positives in the future, and very elderly people may not feel comfortable pondering too far ahead. And this is not a technique that would be appropriate for people experiencing a situation that offers little chance of improvement, such as a terminal illness or chronic poverty.

Ahmed thinks, however, that the technique could even help people who consider themselves pessimists. As long as they don’t suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety, even glass-

half-empty people generally “assume that the future is more positive than the present, especially if you’re in a not-very-nice present situation.”

Wilson agrees. Participants in her study weren’t told to have positive attitudes in their letters, but they mostly displayed them, anyway. Even if you’re a pessimist, she says, “you can imagine how the negative experience that you’re feeling in the moment is still going to be different a year from now.” And you will have learned coping skills along the way.

### **A boost — or a mind-set**

Of course, writing one letter to yourself isn’t going to improve your mood for the course of an entire pandemic. But, “if you need a boost, it’s something you can do to get yourself out of the moment,” Wilson says.

If you need more than a boost and want to use temporal distancing in an ongoing manner, Ayduk says, you can try “interacting with the world from a viewpoint where, ‘I know this sucks, but it’s going to end, and life will go on. I’m going to be fine.’” Thinking about the pandemic from the perspective of living through a historic event might allow you to perceive daily stressors as less bothersome.

Although no technique is a cure-all, temporal distancing can remind you that, in most cases, no matter how dark a situation seems at the moment, it’s not going to last forever. “It’s kind of like ‘time heals all,’” Ayduk says, “but without having to wait for time to pass.”

*Watson is a freelance writer and author of children’s books, including “[Running Wild](#)” and “[Extreme Abilities](#).”*