

The covid-19 time warp

FIVE years ago, in January 2020, a new year had begun, one that would be like no other in living memory. Three months later, much of the world was in lockdown. Most people were unable to leave home for work or social activities, and with schools shut, many of us were juggling homeschooling while feeling anxious about the future.

Covid-19 had countless impacts on health and well-being, but one surprising effect was a widespread distortion of people's experience of the passage of time. How were those lockdown days for you? Did they fly by or drag on like they would never end? As academics with young children, our lives became seas of unfillable hours that seemed to stretch out far beyond their actual duration. To say that lockdown dragged would be an understatement.

We weren't alone in our covid-19 time warp. Our research shows that UK adults experienced time differently during lockdowns. For about 40 per cent of people, time passed more quickly than normal, but for another 40 per cent, time passed slowly, meaning lockdown days felt longer and slower. How this time passed was determined by how well individuals coped. People who were socially satisfied and had less depression and stress tended to experience lockdown as faster than those who were

socially dissatisfied or had greater stress and depression. Even after the crisis was no longer a global health emergency, for many of us time remained distorted, with those who fared worst remembering the period as longer than those who coped well.

These changes appear to have fundamentally altered how we value time. Prior to covid-19, it was often taken for granted. The sudden lack of autonomy during lockdown left many feeling that time had been lost forever. Unable to control "when", people missed out on time-critical events like IVF and other medical appointments, or final visits to loved ones. These lost opportunities had impacts long into the future.

Anecdotally, covid-19 appears to have focused our attention on the finite nature of time, increasing our desire to avoid wasting it and instead slow down and use it well. However, intense online working and blurred boundaries between work and home have increased the pace of life compared with before the pandemic. In a world where everything is available at the touch of a button, we are more time-poor than ever before. Five years on, these shifting time values have far-reaching health, economic and employment consequences.

This is why we are working to develop a deeper understanding of how experiences of time affect health and decision-making. Covid-19 showed us that time is a barometer for well-being, and how it feels can reshape our emotions, values and priorities. Harnessing the subjectivity of time and enhancing our autonomy over it may therefore improve how we respond to major life events.

By viewing our experience of time as active and malleable, we may be better placed to improve our quality of life. While it is often considered a "great healer", the slowing and elongating of time during stress highlights the possibility that changes in our sense of time contribute to the development of trauma. Preventing the elongation of highly stressful events, for example by using strategies which reduce emotional and physiological arousal, may thus be an effective, and currently overlooked, way to aid recovery.

While the loss of time to covid-19 remains unbearable for some, our experiences show how attending to time changes how we feel. By appreciating time's finite nature, we may be better able to spend what remains of it well.