



The Perception of Time

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Remember when you were a child and it seemed like Christmas or your birthday would never arrive? The days passed so slowly in high school before the summer vacation arrived. Even waiting for Friday's date night could feel like pure torture. People who have been in serious accidents often comment about the fact that while it was happening everything seemed to be in slow motion or that time actually stopped.

Sometimes the opposite occurs. As we age, for example, time seems to go faster and faster. We just get through Christmas and before we know it, there are seasonal decorations up in the mall again and gift flyers arriving in the mailbox. Birthdays arrive and we are surprised at the number of candles on the cake. Aging children and then grandchildren give others the impression that we are actually older than we feel. Instead of thinking that there will be years and years of opportunities to do things, we start thinking in numbers of events. Seven more annual fishing trips. Last new car purchase. One more major trip.

We think that time changes things. Or is it just that we change over time? Or both?

The brain is a very complex computer that has never been fully used or understood. Modern neurosciences, however, have been doing research that provides insight into how humans think, communicate, learn and function. The human brain contains around one hundred billion neurons and one hundred trillion synapses. That's quite a system! The neurons send electrical charges or messages through the synapses which are like junction boxes. As a result, pathways are formed and the more each pathway is used, the stronger it gets.

Let's use language, as an example. When a child is born, s/he doesn't know the names of things. In the months that follow, caregivers begin telling them words to go with the objects that they see. Sometimes the child uses the correct word but sometimes the wrong word. They might see a cow and say "dog". Over time, the pathways strengthen and the child automatically uses the correct word.

It's the same with adults. The first time that we travel to an unfamiliar place we may be hypervigilant because we don't have a brain pathway for the trip. Even though we may have had many experiences with highways, airplanes and other travel opportunities, we need to lay down a new pathway for this particular time. Repeating it again, however, will be easier.

The interesting thing is that time, therefore is affected by our past experiences. People have told me that once you have learned a second language then a third is easier. Could this be because the language pathways have been strengthened?

Some pathways are used for more than one thing. Years ago, I attended a conference where we were told that music and math share the same pathway and that is why the Japanese are good at both. I don't have any evidence for this but it makes sense.

Well, back to the perception of time. If our reality is actually based on our past experiences then it makes sense that children would think time goes slowly and adults would think it goes quickly. The adult has had many more opportunities to learn about days, months and years as well as what to expect. They have developed a familiar pathway that explains time.

And just when we think that we have the theory all figured out, we find an exception. Like why a senior in a nursing home finds that time once again goes very slowly. Perhaps that is because the senior is lonely or doesn't have anything new and interesting to do. No exciting new pathways to form.

It was broadcaster Westbrook Van Voorhis, who narrated the "March of Time" newsreel series from the 1930s to the early 1950s. His familiar catchphrase was "Time... marches on!"

Time does not change based on our age or circumstances. It is just our perception of time that changes.

Time just marches on...