

Time Orientation and Well-Being

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Abstract

Time is a concept that is rarely discussed in counseling and psychotherapy, except in discussions of how long therapy should last. This article addresses other important aspects of time that are relevant to counselors and psychotherapists and their clients. Controversies about time are described, including the debate over whether time exists or is a mental construct. Subjective and psychological aspects of time are described, as are psychological disorders that relate to time orientation. The subjective sense that time speeds up as we grow older is explained, and suggestions are made for how to change the personal sense of time passing (to make time seem to go faster or slower). Finally, suggestions are made for working with clients who have problems related to time. Improving our relationship to time can lead to a greater sense of well-being.

Does Time Exist?

For us as humans, it feels as though time exists and that it flows, in the sense that the present is constantly changing. We live in the present moment, but each moment is followed by another. It seems certain that the future is open and that the past is fixed; this structure is built into our language, thought, and behavior. Yet according to current scientific thinking, time is a mental construct or illusion, and may not actually exist in the real world, at least not in the simplistic way we usually think of it (Callender, 2010; Davies, 2002; Vedral, 2011).

Time is an abstract notion, and although we say we measure time with clocks, of course we never actually sense time itself. Clocks do not measure time; rather time is defined as what clocks measure. Since time is an abstract idea, it does not exist in reality (physicists call this the “problem of time”). There is now good experimental evidence suggesting that time may not exist at the most fundamental level of physical reality (Folger, 2007).

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The idea that time is illusory is not new. William James (1950) called “now” the “specious present,” referring to the false sense we have that “now” has some content or duration, even if very short, when actually the present does not exist. The present is simply the boundary line between the past and the future, which also do not currently exist. James saw “now” as simply a subjective construct we use to mark our experience of time (Cathcart & Klein, 2010). Contemporary physicists agree with James. The present moment does not exist in the equations of physics, and neither does the flow of time. “Many in theoretical physics have come to believe that time fundamentally does not even exist” (Callender, 2010, p. 59).

Most contemporary physicists accept that quantum physics describes reality at the fundamental level better than classical physics, even though the nature of reality as described by quantum physics is counterintuitive and difficult, if not impossible, to visualize (Vedral, 2011). Since according to quantum physics reality is spaceless and timeless, it is difficult to understand how space and time somehow emerge from spaceless and timeless physics. But ever since Einstein’s theories of relativity, we have known that time is not a universal constant; thus, the past, present, and future are not absolute. Relativity theory has yielded to a deeper theory in which space and time do not exist (Vedral, 2011). When Einstein learned that a friend had died, he wrote a letter to the grieving family (dated less than a month before his own death): “Now he has departed this strange world a little ahead of me. That signifies nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion” (Falk, 2008, p. 296).

Time is asymmetrical; we remember the past but not the future (Carroll, 2010). The idea of time travel has fascinated many people, as indicated by the popularity of time travel stories, books, and movies. The asymmetry of time suggests that if time travel ever becomes possible, it will be limited to travel to the past. The past has already occurred, but the future does not exist. Of course in a sense we are all traveling into the future moment by moment, but that is not what people usually mean by time travel.

Currently the brain is the only time machine; we travel to the past (in memory) and the future (in imagination) (Klein, 2006).

The days of thinking of time as a river (evenly flowing and always advancing) are over. Physicists insist that time does not flow; if it exists, it simply is. Philosophers have said that the idea of time flowing is logically inconsistent. If time flows, relative to what does it move? Asking “How fast does time flow?” exposes the absurdity of the idea; the answer “one second per second” tells us nothing (Davies, 2002). Time perception is a construction of the brain, and is surprisingly easy to manipulate experimentally. We already know that our visual system is highly susceptible to optical illusions, and we are learning that our sense of time is just as subject to illusion (Eagleman, 2009). Even our feeling that we live in the present may be illusory. The brain lives just a little bit in the past; “now” actually happened a little while ago (Burdick, 2011). Electrical signals travel quite slowly in the nerves and the brain, and the tactile, auditory, and visual systems process information at different rates. The information has to get stitched together, and the process takes so long that by the time you realize the moment now has occurred, it is already far in the past (Eagleman, 2011).

The Psychological Experience of Time

Albert Einstein said “The distinction between past, present and future is an illusion, but a very persistent one” (Palma, 2008, p. 1). Even if time may not exist at the most fundamental level of reality, the concept of time still provides a useful way to think about what happens at the level of our everyday existence. However, we think about and experience time in so many different ways that it can be confusing. If time were simple we would not have so many different ways to describe it. Time heals, steals, and flies. Time is something we make and take, save and spend, keep, waste, kill, and lose. Time is a circus, a thief, a trap, a reef, a storm, a river, a gift, a school, a fire, a teacher; and time is money (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). According to Delmore Schwartz, “Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn” (Knowles, 2009, p. 649) and Hector Berlioz said “Time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its pupils” (Macmillan, 2000, p. 571). Poetic and metaphorical expressions of the meaning

of time may reflect our daily experience of it better than scientific explanations. We think of time as elastic; time can crawl or fly, speed up, slow down or stand still; time can shrink, expand, contract or stretch.

Although we think of clocks as measuring time objectively in the external environment, internally our sense of time is highly subjective. Our sense of time passing is largely contingent on the focus of our attention. Depending on our activities and level of concentration, time seems to speed up or slow down. Time flies when we are having fun, because we are not paying attention to signals that time is passing. Likewise, when we are engrossed in absorbing work the hours pass quickly because we are barely registering signals of the passage of time (Klein, 2006).

A preoccupation with time makes it expand; the more one is focused on the passage of time, the slower it seems to go. Boredom is the wish that time were moving along more quickly. The less there is to do, the more time expands, as in prison, especially solitary confinement. Nelson Mandela said of his isolation in South African jails "Every hour seemed like a year" (Klein, 2006, p. 67). Most people would probably say they wished they had more time, but if we had unlimited time we would likely be bored. Although we cannot create more time, we can use our awareness of limited time to motivate us to be actively engaged in life. All we really have is the present moment (if that). Borges (1967) said there is no such thing as the life of a person; each moment we live exists, not the imaginary combination of these moments.

As mentioned above, attention is the most important variable affecting our perception of the passage of time. The closer attention we pay to time, the slower it seems to go ("a watched pot never boils"). But there is a paradox; after a period of waiting that seemed to last forever, if asked how long it took, most people underestimate the duration. The explanation for this paradox seems to be that our assessment of the passage of time is based on the amount of information processed by our brains. While waiting for the water to boil, not much was happening and the time seemed to drag. But later, the time period spent waiting seemed shorter than it actually was because since not much had happened, little information was processed. A

traumatic experience is experienced as lasting much longer than it actually did because it contained a lot of novel stimuli and more information for the brain to process (Restak, 2011).

When we are feeling good and focused on our surroundings, we don't think about time. When we ignore the signals of the passage of time, we think the time passed by quickly. Some of the best hours in our lives appear to be the briefest, yet the same period of time in an unpleasant situation never seems to end (Klein, 2006). When we are caught up in the here and now, we are not attending to the passage of time. The state of "flow" has been described as a state of intense concentration in which self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In the flow state of mind there is total absorption for a period of time in an activity. Activities that induce flow require total focus; one faces a challenge but feels adequate to meet the challenge. The task must have the exact right level of difficulty. If it is too easy, your attention wanders, and if it is too demanding, you also lose your concentration. Only when attention is fully engaged and we feel in control of events are we in a position to achieve a state of complete and effortless concentration, and we tune out thoughts of the past and future. The experience of intense mindfulness in the present moment is possible in all kinds of activities, and characterizes well-being and optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The concept of flow suggests that what we should pursue is not more time, but more engagement in activities we consider worthwhile. Later, in retrospect, it will seem as if the time flew by, but while we are engaged in the task it seems timeless. This experience of timelessness, as felt in flow activities, may be the same state experienced in meditation. It could be that meditation is itself a flow experience; the optimal state of mind in meditation is difficult, but possible to achieve, as with other flow activities. All Eastern and Western methods of meditation are based on the principle of finding a focus of perception. The focal point itself is less important than the continued perception of a given stimulus. Only in this way can the conscious mind remain in the present (Klein, 2006).

Not paying attention to the passage of time may well be more healthy than attending to it, but it is difficult to actively avoid thinking about time (just as it is difficult to deliberately not think about an elephant). It would be better to become actively engaged in challenging and meaningful activities, during which, as a byproduct, we would lose our sense of time. A well-lived life might seem short in retrospect, but the process of living it would seem timeless as it occurred. Wittgenstein (1921) said that if we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration, but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.

Some popular writers have taught that only the present exists, and that meditation can provide an awareness of this fact. Tolle (1999) advised readers to “end the delusion of time” (p. 48) and “access the power of Now” (p. 50). Tolle agrees with the quantum physicists that time does not exist: “Time isn’t precious at all, because it is an illusion. . . . The more you are focused on time . . . the more you miss the Now Life is now. There was never a time when your life was not now” (Tolle, 1999, p. 49). This perspective agrees with the idea that, paradoxically, thinking about time can take you out of the present.

While living in the present is probably desirable most of the time, reminders that we have a limited lifespan can be useful. Mortality is a central fact of our lives, and it is important to us at any age to know or to guess roughly where we are in our time – because that knowledge motivates us to use our time wisely. When we have reason to believe that we have decades ahead of us, we focus our energies on new experiences and learning new things. When we believe that we have very little time left, we focus more on experiences that have emotional meaning for us (Weiner, 2010). “Young or old, when people perceive time as finite, they attach greater importance to finding emotional meaning and satisfaction from life and invest fewer resources into gathering information and expanding horizons” (Carstensen, 2006, p. 1914). When people see time as virtually infinite, our priorities reverse.

Why Time Seems to Speed Up As We Age

People often discover that the older they get, the faster time seems to pass. This sense that time is flowing faster is an illusion, and is probably a function of memory. Our current psychological time flows at the same rate as ever, and it is only in recollecting the past that our memory manufactures a distorted sense of duration (Draaisma, 2006). William James noticed a puzzle in the idea that as we get older time seems to go faster: how can the years speed up when the hours and days do not? He attributed the apparent contraction of the years to the monotony of the memory's content, and the consequent simplification of the backward-looking view. In youth we may have an absolutely new experience, subjective or objective, every hour of the day. The experiences are vivid, and our recollections of that time, like those of a time spent in interesting travel, are intricate and multifaceted. But as each passing year converts some of this experience into automatic routine that we hardly note at all, the days and the weeks smooth themselves out in recollection, and the years grow hollow and collapse (James, 1950).

In his book *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann (1929) referred to the effect of novelty on memory and the sense of time passing. When one day is like all the others, then they are all like one; complete uniformity would make the longest life seem short. Conversely, a full and interesting life will lend to the general passage of time a weightlessness, and make life seem long. Thus, Mann thought that an uneventful life would seem short in retrospect, while an eventful life would seem long. This accords with James's idea that if life becomes more routine and uneventful as we age, then it will seem that time goes by faster as we get older.

Time markers are events whose place in time is well known, such as important personal or family occasions, or national events. There are more memory markers when life is more varied, and there is a positive correlation between the number of time markers and the density of memories. A period of time that brings up many memories will expand when seen in retrospect and seems to have lasted longer than an equally long period with fewer memories. Time markers become less frequent about middle age

and later, so time speeds up subjectively. The variety of experiences is important, as James theorized, but the decline in the number of time markers with aging also contributes to the sense that life speeds up as you get older (Draaisma, 2006).

In our personal perception of time, intensity is also an important factor in our estimates of duration. Traumatic events are repeated in flashbacks, which are memories that cannot be removed at will. Intense events will, in retrospect, seem to have had a much longer duration than more mundane events. Psychological time is influenced by the intensity of emotions, the keenness of memories and expectations, and the effect of routine or novelty. Time speeds up or slows down, shrinks or stretches, in keeping with what happens in our consciousness (Draaisma, 2006). When we think about past experiences, those periods that were filled with intense and unpredictable stimuli tend to get stretched out. In general, the more distinct, meaningful memories you have of a specific time span, the longer it feels (Block, 2008). Of course, people vary in the number and the novelty of their past experiences. Two people who reach age 50 may find that one of them has double the number of memories as the other, so that individual's life will seem to have been both richer and twice as long (Klein, 2006).

Psychological Disorders and Time Orientation

An extreme preoccupation with the past, the present, or the future could be seen as potentially causing psychological distress. Focusing too much on the negative past, as in depressive rumination, is not likely to improve one's mood. It could also be seen as unconscious avoidance of the reality of the present moment. Likewise, focusing on the future (which is unknowable) may provoke anxiety, and takes one out of the present moment. It might even be said that depression is a disorder characterized by excessive focus on negative events in the past and anxiety is a disorder characterized by excessive focus on negative events in the future. If this is true, then part of the treatment of these disorders would be helping the client learn to make a conscious choice to focus on the present, rather than ruminating about the past or projecting fears into the future. However, negative outcomes can also result from excessive focus on the

present (such as emphasizing immediate gratification), including passive fatalism or substance dependence.

Some research has been conducted that illuminates the positive and negative characteristics of various orientations to time. Time perspective has been defined as the preference a person has for thinking of either the past, the present, or the future, and several studies have found that time perspective varies in pathological conditions and abnormal states (Boniwell, 2009). Time perspective can be measured using the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Using this scale, researchers have been able to subdivide time perspective into five factors; a person may be past-negative, past-positive, present-hedonistic, present-fatalistic, and future oriented. A future time perspective has been found to be positively correlated with high academic performance and negatively correlated with depression and hopelessness; negative rumination is associated with a past time perspective and correlates with depression and unhappiness. Depressed people look to the past to feel better, but this kind of depressive rumination quickly deteriorates into deeper depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The treatment for depressive ruminators is to help them turn their attention to planning for a more positive future (Ward, Lyubomirsky, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003).

Zimbardo (2009) noted that we all have a time orientation, but it is largely unconscious and subjective, and it has a central role in how people live. People tend to overuse a particular time perspective, and each perspective has pros and cons. For example, future-oriented people tend to be more successful academically and professionally, eat well, and exercise regularly, but they are the least likely to help others in need. Present-oriented people are the most likely to help others but they are also less likely to exercise or eat well and they tend to have more substance and behavioral addictions. For some past-oriented people the past is filled with positive memories, but for others the past is negative.

While some research has suggested that a time orientation with a focus on the present is a necessary prerequisite for well-being (Boyd-Wilson, Walkey, & McClure,

2002), we now know that it is too simplistic to say that a focus on a particular time orientation is good or bad. Nostalgia (a sentimental yearning for the past) has often been considered negative, but some recent research has indicated that it improves people's moods and is a sign of well-being (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2010). Studies of older adults have found that a past-positive orientation is positively related to life satisfaction (Kazakina, 1999). Thus, reminiscing about a positive past increases feelings of happiness, but negative thoughts about the past cause sadness. It may well be that a flexible and balanced time perspective is a positive alternative to having any one particular temporal bias. It has been suggested that the ability to switch between different time perspectives and fully engage with the current situation is the best route to well-being (Boniwell, 2009).

Even if we accept that living in the present moment is a desirable goal, it is not easy to change mental habits. Our minds are restless and tend to change focus from the present to the past to the future and back again, almost randomly. This is apparently a result of our evolutionary development. Some degree of worrying about the future can be adaptive if it goads us to action. Preoccupation with the past is not as easy to explain, although maybe it is because we can learn from past mistakes. However, a preoccupation with the past or the future can be harmful if it is taken to an extreme and diminishes our engagement with and enjoyment of the present.

Recently neuroscientists have begun to think of certain disorders potentially as problems of timing. For example, reading difficulties in dyslexia may be due to difficulty with syncing auditory and visual input. Some of the symptoms of schizophrenia, such as auditory hallucinations, may result from an order reversal of the generation and the hearing of normal internal monologue (Eagleman, 2009). The idea is that a person with schizophrenia hears an internal voice, just as we all do, but his or her brain processes the voice a little out of sequence, so the thoughts seem to belong to someone else. This tiny quirk in the brain creates a change in processing speed that renders perception unreliable.

Zimbardo (2009) noted some other psychological disorders that are related to problems with time. People with seasonal affective disorder live out of sync with natural temporal rhythms. People with Alzheimer's disease are often unable to draw a clock or tell time, due to cognitive impairment. People with paranoia have a bias toward the future; people with personality disorders have a bias toward the present; people with adjustment disorders often have mistimed or inappropriately timed interactions with others. For people with depression, time passes too slowly; for people with mania, time passes too quickly. People with schizophrenia may have confusion among the past, present, and future.

How To Improve Our Relationship With Time

The most powerful influence over our sense of time is the conscious mind. We have the ability to expand and contract our perception of time intervals. Some strategies make the time go faster, such as distracting oneself while waiting by looking at a magazine or working on a puzzle. The minutes seem shorter because we are not paying attention to them. We are less likely to employ tricks for expanding time. At moments of happiness we tend to ignore time signals. Once we recognize the value of the moment we are experiencing, we try to savor every aspect of it. Senses and memory are highly receptive, and every impression they absorb slows down the time we are experiencing. The paradox is that the very awareness that time is fleeting serves to extend time (Klein, 2006).

To lengthen the perspective of time (to make time expand), it is necessary to fill it with new things. Later, when you look back you will notice that the events you experienced have accumulated in your imagination, and it will seem that you have lived through a long stretch of time. Anyone wishing to feel like they lived a long time, it seems to follow, must abandon routine as often as possible, change the surroundings, and experience novel stimuli. However, the pursuit of novelty has diminishing returns. For example, travel is a good way to have new experiences. The first days in a new place expand time and the days seem long, but as one gets used to the place time shrinks and the days pass rapidly (Draaisma, 2006).

Generally speaking, if you want to slow down your subjective sense of the passage of time, you should do as little as possible; sit quietly as if you are in a waiting room. Do nothing; while waiting the time will seem endless. Of course it seems rather self-defeating to deliberately experience boredom just to make time slow down. If you have too many such quiet experiences, when you are older your life will seem in retrospect to have raced by at a quick pace (Restak, 2011). You can train your perception of time by training yourself to be more aware of the present. The more sense impressions you assimilate from every moment, the richer and more expansive time will seem in retrospect. An hour filled with lively conversation will seem much longer in retrospect than an hour spent daydreaming (Klein, 2006).

The relationship between experienced time and remembered time is like the ups and downs of a seesaw: either the present is interesting and seems to pass quickly, in which case we are rewarded with rich memories, or the present stretches out indefinitely, but seems condensed in our memory afterward (Klein, 2006). Some ways of passing the time are better than others. Watching television kills time in the present and in our memory. When playing a video game, the hours fly by, but afterwards you come away with no memories. Some other activities engage us more fully in the present, such as relaxation and breathing exercises, Tai chi, artistic activities, and playing or performing music. Savoring each individual moment can stretch the experience of time, and is different from the experience of time in flow or meditation. Savoring is now seen as an important factor in enhancing well-being, and strategies for enhancing savoring have been developed (Bryant & Veroff, 2006).

To train yourself to be more sensitive to the passage of time, experience the moment. Linger in the present rather than let your mind wander in the past or the future. Training your attentiveness helps you stay focused on the present, and alters the way you experience time. The more information you absorb and the more memories you amass, the longer an interval of time seems. Attend to present sense impressions. Conscious perception expands time and lifts your mood. There is evidence that we are

happiest when we are wholly in the moment; by learning to concentrate, focus, and control our thoughts we can improve our well-being (Klein, 2006).

It is possible that well-being is linked to the perception of time in a paradoxical fashion. As we get older we want to feel that we have had a long and happy life, but the more active and busy we were enjoying and engaging in life (rather than thinking about time) the shorter our life will seem in retrospect. We could make life feel really long, but only at the cost of inactivity, disengagement, and boredom. So probably the best life is one lived without too much thought or attention given to the passage of time. But of course our awareness that our time is limited can motivate us to live more fully, so occasional reminders of our mortality can be useful.

Counseling and Time Orientation

Counselors should probably pay more attention to the importance of time in clients' lives. Is the client satisfied with his or her use of time? Some clients might say they always feel rushed, and never have enough time to give to family or friends or activities they value. Other clients may complain that they have too much time and that they are bored. Does the client's use of time reflect their values? For example, a client might complain about a lack of time to do valued activities, but admit that they watch several hours of television per day. The counselor could point out this discrepancy between clients' values and their actual behavior and explore ways to bring them into alignment. Is the client preoccupied with the past (and therefore susceptible to depression), or is the client preoccupied with the future (and therefore susceptible to anxiety)? Both of these kinds of clients might benefit from learning to attend more consciously to the present.

Many thinkers have commented on the healing power of the simple passage of time. Pericles said that "Time is the wisest counselor of all" (Knowles, 2009, p. 573) and Disraeli said "Time is the great physician" (Knowles, 2009, p. 270). According to Sophocles in Oedipus Rex "Time eases all things" (Knowles, 2009, p. 728) and the popular American proverb says "Time heals all things" (Macmillan, 2000). Presumably the idea is that with the passage of enough time, the pain of past negative experiences

lessens. This is probably true to an extent, since most memories tend to fade with time. However, deeply emotional experiences can sustain themselves in our memories for many years, or even last a lifetime, especially if one thinks about them often. It is clear that time does not always heal the wounds of survivors of traumatic experiences, and people who are chronically depressed often find no relief simply from the passage of time.

The major counseling theories and approaches stress the importance of different time orientations. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the influence of the past, while existential therapy stresses the importance of the present, and humanistic approaches focus on the future (Zimbardo, 2009). All of these approaches work through the client's present concerns to gain control over the past and thus influence the future. Zimbardo (2009) noted that our ability to reconstruct the past, to interpret the present, and to construct the future improves our odds of becoming happy.

Counselors can assist clients who are stuck in the past or preoccupied with the future by helping them realize that such preoccupations are unhelpful. As an anonymous proverb says, "You can't change the past, but you can ruin the present by worrying about the future" (Knowles, 2009). Counselors can help clients explore why they are focused on the past or the future, or they can simply prescribe a solution: gradually learn to live more in the present. Clients may resist giving up rumination on past wounds, or projecting their anxieties into the future, but counselors can help by encouraging clients to examine the costs and benefits of such preoccupations. Clients can be reminded that the past is unchangeable, and the future is unknown, so all we really have is the present. Counselors can help clients see that living in the present means that we are always choosing the focus of our attention, and we do not have to relive past hurts or worry about the future; we have the ability to attend to the present.

To some extent this approach could be seen as a combination of existential and cognitive therapy. Existential therapy addresses anxiety about mortality and emphasizes that we create the meaning of our lives by making conscious choices regarding how to live (Yalom, 1980). Cognitive therapy supports the idea that our

thoughts and beliefs about the world can be inaccurate and can cause us distress (Beck, 1995). Certainly the belief that a past negative experience means one cannot be happy today, or the belief that the future is certain to be negative, could be seen as unreasonable and unhelpful cognitive distortions. Mindfulness-based approaches can also play a role in working with clients suffering from time-related psychopathology. Such approaches can help clients learn to focus their attention on the present rather than the past or the future. However, it should be noted that clients can also suffer from a dysfunctional relationship to time in the present. For example, clients who live in the present hedonistically may develop problems related to the search for elevated mood states, such as using alcohol and drugs, gambling, risky sexual behavior, overeating, dangerous sports, or other high-risk activities.

Since clients can have any of several different time orientations, it can be helpful to conduct an assessment, such as the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). After the client's time orientation has been determined, the counselor can work to help the client clarify problems related to time, and assist the client in working on changing attitudes and behaviors. It may be helpful for clients to learn more about the effects of time orientations, for example by reading Zimbardo's book *The Time Paradox* (2009), which contains his assessment tool and many practical suggestions for developing a healthy relationship to time. For Zimbardo (2009), "psychotherapy can be seen as an attempt to work through the present to gain control over the past and thereby the future" (p. 20).

A counselor who notices that a client habitually refers to negative events in the past or catastrophic expectations for the future can raise the client's awareness of the importance of having a more balanced time perspective. An over-reliance on any one temporal zone can be called into question, and strategies can be developed to assist the client to devote more attention to under-used temporal zones (Boniwell, 2009).

Zimbardo (2009) adapted Lyubomirsky's (2008) strategies for increasing happiness to show how they match the needs of people with different time orientations. Counselors can use these ideas to help clients develop a more balanced time

perspective. For example, clients with a negative past orientation can be asked to avoid over-thinking and rumination; clients with a negative present orientation can be asked to increase flow and savoring experiences; and clients with a negative future orientation can be asked to cultivate optimism, set goals, and develop coping strategies.

Conclusion

Our sense of time influences what we do and the meaning we attribute to our activities. We all know that time is limited, and that eventually our time will run out when we die. When we are young we envision a long life stretching ahead of us, and there seems to be plenty of time to do everything. But as we enter middle age and the later years we sense that time is growing shorter, and this awareness of finitude lends an urgency to our days (Weiner, 2010).

As humans we are aware that we have a limited amount of time to exist, and this knowledge can either make us anxious or it can motivate us to use our time well. An Indian proverb says that “Time will consume all things including itself” (Knowles, 2009, p. 73) and Ovid said that “Time is the devourer of everything” (Knowles, 2009, p. 561). The passage of time is a reminder of death. Some clients experience an existential crisis when they confront the certainty of death, and can become anxious or depressed. Counseling and psychotherapy can be an effective way for clients to learn to accept the inherent limitations of life and make the choice to make every day count.

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