

We're equipped to deal with the passage of time

by Mark Pavilons

'Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin'

'Into the future ...?'

Well, the Steve Miller Band had it spot on when they sang this 1976 hit.

It had a bit of a 'dreamy' feel to it, not unlike the feeling we have these days, during what's turning out to be one of the longest and strangest years ever.

We've all had the feeling that some days drag on like we're walking in mud, while others fly by.

We know that time doesn't change, so it must be our perception, right?

Our brains and bodies are complex, indeed.

On our own, we can't really keep track of time, that's why our ancestors invented sundials and clocks. Tracking minutes and seconds has become much easier, thanks to technology.

But have our 'inner' clocks or sense of the passing of time gotten better or worse over the centuries?

Psychologists have identified many factors that affect our sense of time, some of which explain our heightened awareness of it this year, during the pandemic.

Our emotion distorts time, the experts say.

A number of studies have looked at how attention and emotion affect our sense of time.

They said things that grab our attention or require more attention and they actually feel like they last much longer.

Emotions can also influence our perception of time. Sadly, if we're having fun or on vacation, time flies. Conversely, if we're sad, depressed, lonely, stressed, burdened, time drags like a ball and chain.

Most of us know that a busy day usually goes by quickly, especially when we're running errands.

But for some the opposite is true in 2020. Front-line health-care workers, for example, know they are at high risk of exposure to the coronavirus, and the resulting anxiety heightens their attentiveness and slows their perception of how quickly a day passes.

We tend to rely on memory rather than knowledge to date events happening within our lifetime. But as our memory distorts our perception of time, it also affects our sense of when an event took place.

Psychologists have found that it's common when recalling a long-ago event to think that it happened more recently than it did. But if the event happened within the past three years, we often think that it happened longer ago.

This effect is called telescoping. Think of it as looking backward or forwards through a telescope where images are distorted depending on the orientation.

There's no question 2020 will not soon be forgotten. But already, more than four months into this altered reality, and I can't recall the details of March, when the world came to a halt. I remember the shortage of essentials and the mad dash to the grocery store, but I don't have many crystal-clear memories of pandemic activities around our house.

Is it selective memory, or an illusion of time itself?

Wouldn't it be great if we could freeze those special moments in our brains and make them last forever? How about creating a device that let's us access any memory we want, so we can replay it over and over in our mind's eye?

I have a decent memory for facts, figures and information. I also have quite vivid dreams. Yet, I have no recollection of my early years prior to age 5. The only vivid traumatic memory I have is waking up from nap time in kindergarten. The teacher, for some reason, let me sleep in, while the rest of the class gathered together and began singing songs. This off-key ensemble woke me up and as I rubbed my wearying eyes, I remember a few kids laughing at this sleepy head.

Few memories spring to mind from 7-10.

Those years did pass by as they should have, yet I have no detailed recollection of events.

Even today, my memory is quite selective, and I don't seem to retain much of the mundane, everyday moments.

From day to day, I don't really feel the passage of time. I can see the real-world effects, however, like hair and finger nail growth. If I was lost on a remote island, these, and my Fabio-like locks would be my only indicators of weeks gone by.

I guess I could count the number of sun rises and sunsets, and notch some ticks into a nearby palm tree. At one point, it would all blend together and time would slow to a crawl.

Scientists are still learning about the human brain and memory to this day. Memories are stored mainly in the hippocampus, neocortex and the amygdala. Fiddle around with any of these and our precious memories are lost forever.

Experiments in animals showed that removing or changing just a single chemical or molecule can prevent the formation of memories, or even destroy memories that already exist.

I'm not alone in the memory game. Our ability to remember new information peaks in our 20s, and then starts to decline noticeably from our 50s or 60s. But new studies centre around whether exercise can improve brain function. Fingers crossed.

Time carries on without a mere thought of us mere mortals.

Until our concept of linear time changes, we are stuck with slipping, slipping, into the future.

Enjoy the ride.