

Real Good For Free: The Paradox of Leisure Time

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I'm pretty busy. Like most people I know, I try to balance a lot of different things—a full-time job, household chores, cooking and meals, regular exercise, time with family and friends. Throw in an occasional bike ride, a movie or museum, maybe even reading a book—oh, and sleep—and there aren't many free minutes left in a typical week.

Yet I volunteer my time, too. I do this because it's a good cause, but also because it makes me feel good. And somewhat surprisingly, I've never had the sense that this is one more obligation chipping away at my already compressed day. Indeed, it sometimes seems the other way around, as if working for free eases the time pressure of modern life.

This doesn't make any sense, of course. An hour is an hour, whether I'm working on deadline, chilling in front of the TV, or helping someone out. But that's objective time. New research now suggests that our subjective sense of time may be something else entirely. The way we perceive an hour may vary greatly, depending on how we're spending that hour, and volunteering may actually create a sensation that time is expanding.

Psychological scientist Cassie Mogilner of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School is an expert on the quirks of time perception. Working with colleagues at Harvard and Yale, she decided to explore the notion that giving away time has the paradoxical effect of easing time pressure. In a series of experiments, they compared volunteering time to wasting time, indulging in selfish time, and getting a windfall of unexpected free time. How do these experiences make us feel about the scarcity of personal time?

First, wasting time—since frittering away minutes and hours is something most of us can readily identify with. To study this common experience, Mogilner interrupted students right near the end of a one-hour lab session and asked them to perform a five-minute task. Some did a meaningless task—crossing out the letter “e” in pages of Latin text. This was the lab equivalent of wasting time. The others used the same time to write an encouraging note to a gravely ill child. This wasn't just an exercise; the notes were mailed to the children.

Afterward, all the students answered a survey about time perception, agreeing (or not) with statements like: “My future seems infinite to me.” Mogilner wanted to see if the volunteers and the time wasters had significantly different senses of personal time—and they did. Even though both giving time and frittering time suggest that one has an abundance of time, the students who had spent their time helping a sick child felt that they had a more expansive future than did those who wasted their free time.

I know what you're thinking. Crossing out letters in a Latin text isn't any fun. Indeed, it's probably unpleasant and tedious for most people. Wouldn't this skew the results? To correct for this possibility, the scientists ran a slightly different version of the experiment, in which the time wasters were at least

doing something enjoyable. Indulging oneself in some “me” activity also indicates that one has time to spare, so in this study, some of the volunteers spent part of a Saturday morning doing something for themselves—anything they wanted, as long as it was something unplanned. Others spent the same time doing something for someone else, also of their own choosing. Then, as before, all the volunteers described their time perceptions and, again, spending time selflessly seemed to alter the volunteers’ sense of the future, expanding time.

So it doesn’t matter if we are meaninglessly frittering away our minutes or indulging in some “me” time—neither makes time seem abundant the way that giving away time appears to do. But what about an actual windfall? We all know that joy—thinking we’re obligated to do something, but then getting a last minute reprieve. It’s an actual grant of free time, so surely it should help take the pressure off.

Well, apparently not. Mogilner ran another experiment similar to the first, interrupting people to perform a brief task. All of the students were told that they would be helping a disadvantaged high school student by editing his or her college application essay, but only some actually did this. The others were told at the last minute that the editing was complete and they were free to go. They were granted a reprieve, a windfall of free time.

Before leaving, they all described their perceptions of time, but in this case not future time. Instead, they indicated how scarce time is; how much spare time they felt they had; and how much time they were actually willing to commit in the week ahead.

The volunteers differed on all these measures. Those who had helped the college applicant felt the scarcity of time less acutely, and they felt that they personally had more time to spare. And it wasn’t just talk. They were also willing to commit more of this leisure time in the week ahead. In short, the experience of giving away time didn’t eat into free time as one would expect. It diminished the sense of time scarcity that many find so stressful these days.

So what’s going on here? What is the cognitive mechanism underlying this unexpected shift in time perspective? Mogilner has an idea, and some evidence to back it up. In a final experiment, she explored several possible explanations for this phenomenon: Do the volunteers feel more connected to others? Do they feel they are using their time in more meaningful ways? Are they enjoying their time more? Or do they feel more competent and efficient?

Only the last explanation explained the findings. As described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, those who spent time selflessly had a much stronger sense of personal power and effectiveness. Helping others apparently makes us feel we can accomplish more in less time, and this “fullness” of time seems to stretch time in our minds. It’s not that the volunteers don’t feel connected or that they don’t find the volunteer work meaningful and enjoyable—they do. But only the boosted sense of self-efficacy actually triggered the shifts in time perception.

I don’t know about you, but the last thing I want to do at the end of the work day is do more work for free. The TV is so tempting, or if I can motivate myself, maybe the exercise bike. These findings suggest these indulgences may just be adding to my pressurized life. The fact is, Americans have more leisure time than ever before in history. We just don’t feel that we do. Giving away some of this abundant leisure time may be the key to feeling as leisurely as we are in fact.

Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought*, is about irrational decision making. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in [*The Huffington Post*](#) and in *Scientific American Mind*.