

A Psychologist Explains Why 2018 Felt Like the Longest Year Ever

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You might think that a year as chock full of newsworthy events as 2018 would feel like it blazed by in a flash. Yet for many of us, January feels like it was eons ago. So did 2018 fly by, or did it drag on?

The answer is, strangely, both.

Humans have a complicated relationship with time. Unlike physical matter and energy, we have no organ that directly detects time. Instead, our brains judge time indirectly, mostly through two processes—attention and memory.

When we think about how time is *currently* progressing, time judgments are based primarily on attention. As anyone who has ever watched a clock (or the proverbial pot of water) can attest, the more attention we give to time's passage, the slower it seems to go. But when our lives get busy, and when the world gives us lots of things to think about, we are more distracted from time's passage.

As a result, it feels as though the minutes pass by more quickly. The same can be said for longer durations of time. When days, weeks, and months are packed with distractions—ranging from personal (“I have to clear out these emails!”) to global (“I can’t stop watching the footage of this tsunami!”)—we take fewer opportunities to monitor the passage of time and we’re more likely to later be surprised at how much time has passed. Yes, time flies when you’re having fun, but mainly because your mind is distracted. Other distractions can work just as well.