

Rediscovering Our Mundane Moments Brings Us Unexpected Pleasure

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We like to document the exciting and momentous occasions in our lives, but new [research](#) suggests there is value in capturing our more mundane, everyday experiences, which can bring us unexpected joy in the future.

“We generally do not think about today’s ordinary moments as experiences that are worthy of being rediscovered in the future. However, our studies show that we are often wrong: What is ordinary now actually becomes more extraordinary in the future — and more extraordinary than we might expect,” explains psychological scientist and lead researcher Ting Zhang of Harvard Business School.



The [findings](#) are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Science has shown that we consistently make errors in trying to predict how we’ll feel about something and how much we’ll remember from that experience later on. Zhang and colleagues speculated that these prediction errors might explain why we’re keen to document the extraordinary moments in our lives through pictures, journal entries, and mementos but we overlook documenting the more mundane moments, such as conversations with friends or a day at the office.

In one study, the researchers had 135 college students create time capsules at the beginning of the summer; they wrote about a range of different experiences they recently had, including the last social event they attended, a recent conversation, three songs they were currently listening to, and an excerpt from a final paper they had written.

For each memory, the students were asked to predict how curious and surprised they would be to read about it later, and how meaningful and interesting they would find it. The students “opened” these time

capsules three months later, at the beginning of the following school year, and rated the memories again.

The results showed that students had significantly underestimated their curiosity and interest in the time capsules, findings that were echoed in a second online study.

This may occur because we have different expectations for how we'll feel about ordinary and extraordinary events that lead us to underestimate the value of ordinary experiences.

Indeed, participants in another study underestimated how much they would enjoy reading about a “typical” experience with their partner, while they were fairly accurate in estimating how much they would enjoy reading about what they did on a more extraordinary day, Valentine’s Day.

The research suggests that undervaluing mundane events may actually lead us to forego what would be pleasurable experiences of rediscovery.

A final study revealed that only 27% of participants chose to write about a recent conversation over watching a video of a talk-show interview. However, when it came time to decide which one they’d rather revisit 1 month later, 58% of participants chose to read about the conversation they had had.

Participants were overly optimistic in estimating how much of the conversation they would remember — the more they overestimated the fidelity of their memory, the more they underestimated how interesting they would find the accounts of their conversation one month later.

While we don’t remember as much as we might have expected, bringing memories back to life may not be too difficult: Participants’ feedback indicated that reading a few sentences was all it took to evoke the feelings and circumstances that surrounded the documented experience.

“People find a lot of joy in rediscovering a music playlist from months ago or an old joke with a neighbor, even though those things did not seem particularly meaningful in the moment,” says Zhang. “The studies highlight the importance of not taking the present for granted and documenting the mundane moments of daily life to give our future selves the joy of rediscovering them.”

This doesn’t mean that we should start documenting everything we do in order to maximize pleasure, however.

Some acts of documentation, such as trying to get just the right shot of your artfully prepared restaurant meal, can interrupt the present moment and detract from the overall experience. Additional research is needed to discover where the tipping point lies between enjoying the present and documenting the present for enjoyment in the future, says Zhang.

Co-authors on the research include Tami Kim, Alison Wood Brooks, Francesca Gino, and Michael I. Norton of Harvard Business School.

All data and materials have been made publicly available via Open Science Framework and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/t2wby/>. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>. This article has received badges for Open Data

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