

Extracted from: “Why Your Brain Isn’t Into the Future - What you can’t imagine clearly, you value less” by Jim Davies (Nautilus, November 2022)

Living for the moment gets a bad rap. If you’re smart, people say, you should work toward a good future, sacrificing fun and pleasure in the present.

Yet there are good reasons to discount the future. Would you rather find \$5 when you’re in elementary school, or in your forties? People tend to get richer as they age. Five dollars simply means more to you when you’re 9 than when you’re 49. Also, the future is uncertain. We can’t always trust there’ll be one.

It’s likely some kids in Walter Mischel’s famous “marshmallow experiment”—which asked kids to wait to eat a marshmallow to get another one—didn’t actually believe that the experimenter would come through with the second marshmallow, and so ate the first marshmallow right away. Saving for retirement makes no sense if in five years a massive meteor cuts human civilization short. Economists call this the “catastrophe” or “hazard” rate.

So, what makes us discount the future? Dr Sangil Lee (University of California, Berkley), in a new study with his colleagues, pins it at least partly on our powers of imagination. When we think about what hasn’t yet happened, it tends to be abstract. Things right now, on the other hand, we think of in more tangible terms. Several behavioral studies have supported the idea that ***what we cannot clearly imagine, we value less***. We tend to have more intense emotional feelings about things we can imagine vividly.

Lee and his colleagues confirmed this by looking at people’s brain activity with an fMRI when they’re making decisions about the future. They used a brain decoder to detect a “neural signature of the vividness of prospective thought” and showed that “neural measures of vividness decline as rewards are delayed farther into the future.” Lee had people imagine things that varied in how concrete or abstract they were, and how pleasant and unpleasant they were. “We show that when they see options that are farther in the future, their neural vividness scores decrease,” he said.

One way we can fight this bias is by ***deliberately trying to imagine the future more vividly, rather than just using our default imagination***.