

Why living in the future, rather than the past, is key to coping with lockdowns – new research

December 14 2020, by Jane Ogden and Amelia Dennis



Daydreaming in lockdown? Keep it future-focused. Credit: [fizkes/Shutterstock](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a tough year for people across the globe, with billions facing at least one lockdown. And it's not over—there may be further lockdowns needed in the new year. Luckily, researchers have been busy studying what effect they have—and how best to cope.

Lockdowns are stressful because they create uncertainty, fear and social isolation. Because the present becomes anxious and boring, and the future becomes elusive (when will this end?), many people cope by looking back in time and recalling memories of things that we used to be able to do. Now our new study, due to be published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, has found that this often fails to make us feel better.

It's not surprising that many look to the past: researchers in [positive psychology](#) have previously developed a variety of interventions to improve wellbeing that can be incorporated either into therapy or an person's daily self-care routines. Three such approaches are [nostalgia](#), [gratitude](#) and "[best possible self](#)".

Each of these represents a certain time orientation. Nostalgia involves sentimental longing for the past by recalling certain events. By contrast, [gratitude](#) is focused on the present, involving thinking about good things that have happened today. The "best possible self" intervention instead involves thinking about your best possible achievements in the future. But which one works best?

The experiment

To find out, we recruited 261 women during the first lockdown in the UK (March-May 2020) (too few men responded to be included), exploring the impact of the three different time orientations on wellbeing. The participants, aged 18 to 63 years old, completed either a nostalgia, gratitude or best possible self intervention for a one off two-minute session. They then rated their positive and [negative feelings](#), social connections to others, self-esteem and meaning in life—and were compared to a control group (they didn't do any intervention).

The results showed that both those who were asked to think about their

best possible self in the future and those who considered what they were grateful for in the present reported feeling more socially connected to others compared to those who focused on the past and thought about a nostalgic memory. Those participants who focused on the future also reported an increase in positive feelings compared to those who thought about the past.

Feelings of nostalgia may work for some. But our study indicates that people may feel a sense of loss when they compare a wonderful past with a highly uncertain present. This then has negative impact on our wellbeing. In contrast, finding the positives in the present through gratitude for the things we are still able to do or inducing a sense of optimism about the future may be a better coping response.

These findings reflect idioms central to our language. We are often told "be grateful for small mercies," "count our blessings" or "find pleasure in the small things in life" to gain perspective. "Giving thanks" is also core to many religions. These phrases all reflect the emphasis on gratitude and the need to focus on the benefits to be found in the here and now.

Likewise, phrases such as "this too shall pass" and "there's a light at the end of the tunnel" emphasize the importance of future thinking while terms such as "stuck in the past," or "Move on!" reflect the negative impact that rumination can have.

Future lockdowns

The first lockdown was difficult to manage and created uncertainty and a loss of social interaction. But it was novel and it felt as if we were all in it together. It also seemed to be time limited as most of us were optimistic that this worldwide pandemic would be over by the summer. Plus, in the UK, we had the [best spring on record](#), the sun shone and we took pleasure in getting out whenever we could.

Feeling grateful for what we had was relatively easy for those of us able to work from home, with a garden to sit in or tender and new box sets to while away the evenings. Looking to the future was possible when we naively felt that that future wasn't that far away.

But the second lockdown [was different](#) (November). Gratitude requires finding benefit in the here and now but in November the days were wet and dark. More seriously, many people had lost their loved ones and their livelihoods—making it much harder task to give thanks. Similarly, focusing on the future also seems more problematic when the end is not really in sight—the lockdown could have been extended, and there may be another one soon. Many of us have since come out into a world of tough restrictions that pretty much add up to a lockdown anyway.

But humans are resourceful and the wonderful news of a vaccine is already being grabbed to hang our hopes on. So if you find yourself in [lockdown](#) again in the [new year](#), keep this mind—it will be a matter of months before a significant number of people have been vaccinated. All you have to do is think about what to do next. Clearly, this too shall pass.

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