

TIME

How do you perceive time? Perhaps you've never thought about this before, but time is a difficult thing to describe. You can't see it, hear it or feel it. So how do you **represent** it in your mind? What is the difference between the way you imagine the future and the way you remember (or imagine!) the past?

It seems that most people represent time spatially, as a combination of direction and distance. The distance element shows up in the language we use about time, e.g. "the far future", "the distant past". Direction is revealed in phrases like "back then" and also in the gestures we use, such as pointing to the past or the future when talking about them. And here lie some fascinating differences!

The chances are you either think of time as:

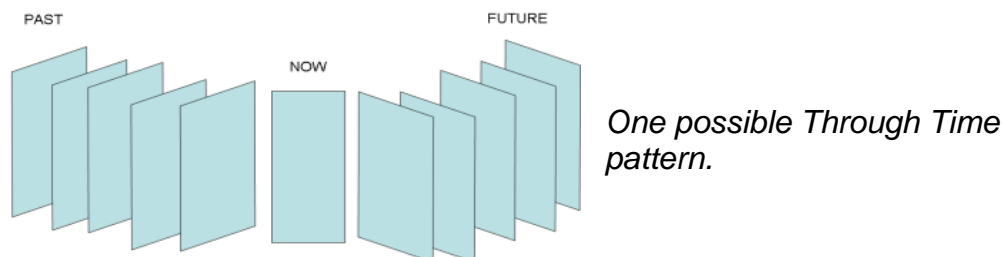
- flowing from left to right, in front of you, or
- running from behind you to in front.

Whichever one you "do", you probably hadn't realised it before. If you did, then you probably assumed that everyone else did it the same way as you.

The first representation is called "Through Time". Here, you perceive the past as being off to your left, the future stretching out to your right, and the present just in front of you. You are slightly separated from the present moment and you are able to "see" past events from a detached or "dissociated" perspective. This has the benefit of making it relatively easy to keep unpleasant memories away. You can also see the pattern of the future laid out and so you probably find that making plans is fairly easy for you.

A downside of this perspective is that you are not usually "in the moment". This can make it difficult to enjoy what's happening or to focus completely on what you're doing. You are distracted by the future out of the corner of your eye!

The diagram shows what this might be like, where the rectangles represent images, imagined or remembered.



The second representation is called “In Time”. You perceive the past to be behind you, the present to be where you are now (you are “in the moment”) and the future in front of you, the nearer things hiding the further ones. If you are In Time you can enjoy what’s happening without worrying about what might happen next. The downside of this is that you probably forget things when you’re planning and might have only a very hazy idea of the future because events stack up behind each other so you can only see the first one clearly. This might inhibit your motivation to take action to create the future.

Also, because the past is behind you, you probably can’t see it without “associating” into it. You relive past events every time you recall them. Great for the good times, potentially hellish if you’ve experienced trauma in your life.

The future half of an In Time timeline



Perhaps you’re thinking that your representation isn’t quite like either of these. In fact there is a multitude of variations around the two broad types. For example, some In-Timers have the past in front of them, and some are not aware of any future at all! But these are exceptional cases in my experience. More common is a very individual shape to the “timeline”, perhaps curving upwards and then down again, within the overall In Time or Through Time model.

How can we use this insight?

First of all it can help us to understand other people’s behaviour. For example, I’ve known someone who was in trouble for failing to manage the ordering of vital materials for his project. This wasn’t the first time that his sort of thing had happened. It turned out that he was an In Timer, so he liked to be absorbed in the detail of the current task. Whereas he was quite blind to the picture that his manager had of the overall progress of the work as a succession of logically connected steps.

Second, **we can change our perception when we want to.** The In-Timer just mentioned, found it an astonishing revelation when he was shown how to imagine his timeline as being fixed to the floor underneath him. Then he was able to step off to one side (literally), leaving his timeline where it was and turn to see it for the first time from a Through Time perspective. This was the first step to learning how to foresee and plan for the future as he had never been able to before.

Similarly, a Through-Timer can imagine stepping into their timeline and turning to face the future, seeing it from inside. I know from personal experience that this can be very disorienting and quite scary! However, combined with a walk “into the future”, this is a powerful way of building motivation and positive beliefs as you get to **feel** what your future achievements will be like as if you’ve already achieved them.

The timeline concept also provides the basis of a whole therapeutic approach for changing our personal history, fundamentally changing how we feel about past events.

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