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## Why You Keep Signing Your Future Self Up for Stuff You Don't Actually Want to Do

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The first week of March is approaching, which does not bode well for me. Every month, it seems, I end up punting too many annoying tasks and requests to the first week of the following month, assuming that even though I don't have time for these things *now*, surely I will *later*. March Me can handle it. Sign March Me up.

And yet there is, of course, no rational reason to think that March Me will actually be any less busy than Present Me. A fascinating line of psychological research explains why this is my monthly pattern, and why it might be yours, too: People tend to think of **their future selves** as different, separate people from their present selves. Because of this, many psychologists view the mind "**as composed as multiple selves**: The self that chooses well in advance and the self that faces the consequences," write a trio of Princeton researchers in a **paper** published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Usually, **researchers who study this focus on procrastination**. For example, people tend to put off things that will benefit them in the future (like exercising or saving for retirement) in favor of things that will benefit them *right now* (like watching Netflix and spending too much on *Seamless*). But there are other ways we routinely screw over our future selves, too — by signing *them* up for things that *we* have no interest in doing, as if future you and present you are not in fact one and the same *you*.

For evidence of this phenomenon, consider an experiment recounted in that aforementioned paper, involving the freshmen dorms at Princeton. An experimenter descended upon those dorms on a Monday or Tuesday night during midterm week, knocking on doors and introducing herself as a fellow freshman. The experimenter greeted each student with a canned speech: "Now that it's midterms week, there are several people in our class who are having major academic problems and are in danger of failing." The experimenter would then tell the student that she was trying to put together a last-minute peer-tutoring program that week, to help the students who were most at risk of failing their midterms. And then came the request: "We're asking you if you'd be able to help one of these students this week, for somewhere between 15 minutes and 6 hours. How much time do you think you can spare to help out this week?"

Other students were given the same spiel but were told that the peer-tutoring would begin during the next semester's midterms week. Finally, a third group was asked to estimate the amount of time freshmen in general could spare for such a program.

The results show a pretty clear pattern: People sign their future selves up for things they have little current desire to do. When students were asked how much time they could spare that week, their average answer was about 27 minutes. But next semester? Next semester, put them down for an hour and a half of tutoring. These answers, incidentally, were much closer to their answers for their fellow students, who, they estimated, could spare about two hours in a busy week to help out with tutoring.

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So this experiment, argue the researchers — led by Princeton psychologist Emily Pronin — adds more evidence to that idea that people think of their future selves as something separate from their current selves. Another innovative study conducted by Hal Hershfield at the University of California, Los Angeles, found further evidence of this using brain-imaging technology. Hershfield and his colleagues measured people's brain activity as they thought of a variety of different people: celebrities like Natalie Portman or Matt Damon, but also themselves ten years from now. Hershfield's results showed a similar pattern in brain activity when the people were thinking of the celebrities and when they were thinking about themselves in a decade. It makes a certain amount of sense: They'd never met the celebrities, and, really, they hadn't met that version of themselves, either.

And this provides a clue as to why making decisions for yourself in the future can be so tricky. Decision-making, obviously, involves a lot of introspection; you're taking stock of your thoughts, feelings, and desires in order to make the best possible choice. Research has suggested that people are pretty bad at guessing at the inner lives of others, and tend to assume that other people's thoughts and feelings are probably pretty similar to their own. But think about it: The thoughts and feelings of yourself one month or one year from now seems about as unknowable as the thoughts or feelings of the colleague seated next to you at work or, to go back to the Princeton example, the student one dorm room over. "We experience our own [thoughts and emotions] internally. We can look inward," Pronin [told Science of Us last year](#). "Whereas, for other people, we only know what their thoughts or emotions might be through their actions. So the future self — and in that same way, the past self — are more like another person than they are like the self, because we can't experience the feelings of a past and future self like we can with the present self."

But that same Princeton experiment also suggests a way to counteract this annoying tendency. When the students were reminded that next semester they would still likely be dealing with all of the time constraints and pressures that they were currently battling, this effect shrank. In another condition of that same study, the experimenter reminded the freshmen that next semester they'd "have about the same amount of work that you do now, you're going to feel all the same time pressures, you'll still have the same concerns about how to balance schoolwork, going out, volunteer work, and everything else. Basically, you are going to be the same person you are now." Students who were reminded of this cut back their promises for the following semester by half, from an hour and a half to about 45 minutes on average.

On the one hand, if you're aware of this tendency, you can use it to set a good-natured trap for your future self. When the weather (eventually) turns to spring, for example, and you'd like to start riding your bike to work, for example, you could fill up your MTA card less frequently, which will then pretty much force you to take your bike. Or, if you're trying to figure out how much of your paycheck to put toward retirement, try thinking about an upcoming paycheck instead of your current one, which could trick you into saving more.

Overall, though, the lessons from this research could help you start to reach a kind of harmony between those two warring selves. "Let's say you're a very busy person, and you often get asked to give talks at conferences. And you say, 'Oh, yeah, sure,'" Pronin told Science of Us. "So that might be a case where you might want to say to yourself, 'Look, I want to be kind to myself, I don't want to be a stressed-out wreck. If the conference were today, would I want to do it?'" And if the answer's no, maybe you turn it down." In many

cases, it might be best to use your present emotions as a guide for predicting your future emotions. After all, future you *is still you*. You would be very much obliged if you would be so kind as to keep that in mind.

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