

Meet Future You. (Now be nice.)

Psychology offers a strange new tactic for keeping your resolutions

By [Leon Neyfakh](#) | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 04, 2013

THE FIRST WEEKS of a new year can be tumultuous and invigorating. It's the moment we consider the unstoppable passage of time—how did it get so late?—while trying, more intently than usual, to map out our as yet unwritten future.

Following that map, of course, is the hard part. As reliably as the calendar changes, resolutions fall by the wayside, and old habits reassert themselves. We know it's going to happen, and we think we even know why. After a while, the necessary willpower to delay gratification in the interest of an abstract future benefit gives way to temptation. It seems straightforward enough: We fail because now is more powerful than later.

But the problem may be a little more complicated than that—stranger, and more personal. Psychologists are finding that what makes resolutions so hard to keep, at least in part, is that most of us don't really believe that our future selves—the people we'll turn into five, ten, twenty years from now—are actually, truly us.



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“It’s a weird notion, because at the end of the day, you are always yourself, and you live in the same body whether you’re 20 or 70—you’re encased by the same skin,” said Hal Hershfield, an assistant professor at the Stern School of Business at New York University. “But on an emotional level, it can seem as if that distant self is another person altogether.”

The notion that we see our present and future selves as separate entities has given rise to a productive and intriguing new line of research in psychology—one that reformulates the concept of self-improvement as doing right by the people we have yet to become. And researchers say our disconnectedness from the older version of us is more than a metaphor for the difficulty of imagining the future—it’s a surprisingly powerful subconscious influence on our behavior.

A Harvard study says you’ll change more than you think

People, young and old, routinely underestimate the amount they will change over the next 10 years, according to a study.

All of this matters more than ever this week, as we go about laying our idealistic plans, imagining our future selves being healthier, smarter, and happier than we are right now. They sound like lovely people, don’t they? Now if only someone would introduce us.

IF YOU’VE EVER considered your relationship with “future you” before, it’s probably been while watching movies like “Back to the Future II” and, more recently, “Looper,” both of which drew their energy from the mind-blowing fantasy of young characters coming face to face with the people they were set to become. That collision of selves across time is also a serious philosophical question, prominently taken up by

the British philosopher Derek Parfit. Parfit proposed an unusual way of looking at personal identity: not as something continuous and coherent, but rather as a succession of tangentially related selves.

“Parfit advanced this very controversial hypothesis that your future self isn’t really you —that basically every day, tiny little changes happen to you, and that over the course of decades those tiny little changes add up,” said Daniel Bartels, an assistant professor of marketing at Columbia University who studies the role of future selves in financial decision-making.

Bartels, along with a number of other psychologists, became fascinated by Parfit’s vision of the self, and wondered: Was this just a philosophical argument, or might it describe something real about how our brains work? If we intuitively believe we’re different people over time, they thought, it could shed light on how we make decisions —why so many of us find it difficult to stay conscious of our long-term goals, for instance, and why resolutions might be hard to stick to.

Early results suggested Parfit had been onto something. In 2006, Emily Pronin and Lee Ross, psychologists at Princeton and Stanford respectively, found that when people imagine future experiences, they see themselves in their mind’s eye in the third person, as if watching someone else. Meanwhile, Hershfield of NYU and a team led by Harvard University’s Jason Mitchell and “Stumbling on Happiness” author Daniel Gilbert both looked at brain activity, hooking test subjects up to an fMRI machine and comparing what happened when they thought about their future selves with what happened when they thought about other people. Their results, which Hershfield and the Harvard group obtained in separate, unrelated studies, indicated that subjects used different parts of the brain when imagining their future and their present, and that the activity that showed up while they thought about their “future selves” was very similar to what happened when they thought about a different person entirely. (A new study published by Gilbert in *Science* last week makes this gap seem especially surprising: When we look 10 years ahead, he found, we tend to overestimate how similar our personalities will remain.)

In the years since those first studies, psychologists have found evidence that thinking of the future self as a separate person has a real impact on how people make choices and evaluate trade-offs. In one study, a team led by Pronin found that people were as willing to commit to making sacrifices at some point in the future as they were to commit others to the same sacrifices—but considerably less willing to make the sacrifices themselves in the present. In another study, Bartels and his coauthors found that college seniors who'd been told their personalities and concerns were likely to change dramatically after graduation were more likely to make ultimately unfavorable but briefly gratifying choices than those who'd been told they were going to mostly stay the same. Separately, Hershfield found that people who reported feeling more “connected” to their future selves saved more money and were less likely to lie, make false promises, or cheat.

The obvious takeaway from these studies is that we'd all be better off if we forced ourselves to stop thinking of our future selves as other people: better able to resist temptation, less likely to choose costly short-term pleasures. Hershfield even found a clever way to test that notion. Working with Stanford virtual reality researcher Jeremy Bailenson and the psychologist Dan Goldstein, he showed people realistically aged

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result was striking: People who “met” their aged selves—in all their wrinkly, balding glory—were significantly more inclined afterward to set aside money for retirement.

OF COURSE, we don't all have access to a virtual-reality aging system when we make tough decisions, like choosing between a cold morning jog or the pleasure of a pre-breakfast cigarette. And, clearly, the bad news is that your natural inclination is to think of the beneficiary of that decision—that is, the future you—as little more than a stranger. But there's another way of looking at the problem: to harness that tendency instead of fighting it.

Anne Wilson, a psychologist at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, suggests that, odd as it may seem, there might be some practical benefits to thinking of future us as different people. Multiple studies have shown that fantasizing about our goals and

making resolutions can backfire, she points out, by causing people to give themselves credit for their intentions even though they haven't yet done anything to deserve it. As NYU psychologist Gabriele Oettingen puts it, resolutions can sometimes "seduce" us by allowing to "mentally enjoy" the fantasy of a desired future, and thus sap us of the motivation to actually fulfill it. When it comes to other people, however, a recent study out of Cornell University found that we tend to pay much less attention to potential achievements. Thus, when we hear about a friend's resolution to finally write her novel, we're inclined to be skeptical, and hold off on giving her credit until we've seen evidence that she actually has it in her. For this reason, Wilson suggests that perhaps doubling down on our tendency to see our future selves as wholly separate beings can be an advantage, since doing so might lead us to be less complacent about our resolutions.

"You have to find that sweet spot," said Wilson. "You need to feel connected enough and care enough about [your future self] in order to pursue [your goals], but not feel so close and connected that you just reap the benefits before you've actually done the work."

Hershfield has come to his own conclusion about how to use our sense of separation from our own future. Instead of fighting it, he suggests building a relationship, so to speak. "Early on I would have said, 'We've got to think about our future self as a direct extension of ourselves now,'" Hershfield said. "But now I think...it's fine to think about that future self as another person—it just has to be another person you feel close to and have a lot of overlap with."

After all, aren't the best relationships the ones where two people take personally the other's successes and failures? As Hershfield put it, "The marriages that work best and the friendships that work best are the ones where people feel like the other person is almost part of them." So perhaps the key to being "future-conscious" is making sure that, insofar as our future self feels like someone else, it's someone we love and care about. The child is the father of the man, as the saying goes; perhaps what we need to do is forget about making choices that benefit us currently and focus on these other people, whose well-being and happiness we are so intimately responsible for.

Put another way, we may not know the people we'll turn out to be when we're older—but whoever they are, we should make it a priority to be really, really nice to them.