



# “Time Goes A Lot Faster”: Perceptions of Time In Established Adulthood

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## Abstract

- In this qualitative study, we explored the perception of time and selection of life goals during established adulthood (the period of the lifespan between ages 30-45) by conducting 1-2 hour long interviews with 127 established adults. Results indicated an increased awareness of time, a sense of urgency to make life decisions, age-related limits to taking on new opportunities, and coming to terms with mortality. It is important to continue investigating this topic in established adulthood because a person's sense of time horizons and their perceptions of the achievability and availability of future opportunities may permanently influence the direction of their adult life.

## Background

- The socioemotional selectivity theory states that younger individuals have an expansive perspective of time horizons (Cartensen, 1995, 2006, 2021). As a result, they make decisions and prioritize goals centered around career prospects, the desire to learn, and new social connections.
- As individuals age and learn that time is more limited, individuals become motivated to prioritize goals that maintain social relationships and develop emotion regulation. Outcomes for these individuals are measured in terms of emotional fulfillment (Cartensen, 2021).
- Time can affect decision making in multiple ways, based on processing time and timing the decision of the goal (whether the decision must be made quickly or can be pushed back), and how these decisions are made globally (Lockenhoff, 2011).
- Models of dynamic decision making under uncertainty propose that aging is significantly associated with a decrease in risk-taking (Liu et al., 2019). If emotional fulfillment is not reached, however, older individuals are more likely to make impulsive decisions (Sinha & Wang, 2013).

## Method

### Participants

- Men ( $n = 34$ ) and women ( $n = 93$ )
- Age range 30-45 years ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 4.29$ )
- 73% White, 11% Black, 7% Asian, 6% Mixed
- Married (72.7%), single (18.2%), and divorced (9.1%)
- All participants were heterosexual

### Procedure

- Participants took part in a 1-2 hour recorded interview and were asked open-ended questions about: (1) their general feelings of adulthood, (2) their experiences with adulthood, (3) perceived passage of time, (4) health and physical condition, (5) career development, and (6) feelings about aging and future plans.

## Results

- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to thoroughly and methodically extract themes of mortality from the interview data.
- Four themes were extracted from the data. These four themes included (1) *increased awareness of time*; (2) *awareness of mortality*; (3) *a sense of urgency to make life decisions*; and (4) *limits to opportunities with age*.
- Results indicated that it is essential to make decisions to feel fulfilled. Decisions involve various aspects of relationships, careers, family, communities, and worldviews. A “career and care crunch” takes precedence during this time, that is, emphasizing career goals while also having to care for others simultaneously.

### Increased Awareness of Time

- “Yeah, I feel like time goes a lot faster. I feel like I'm I've always been pretty introspective, but I feel like, as time is passing, I feel like I am. I'm looking at the big picture more and trying to plan ahead more because I realized, like, how, how fast it goes. Yeah, absolutely. Like thinking like, definitely day to day decisions like getting made, but I'm also thinking about more long term effects and the way I make my decisions, I'm thinking kind of 10 years in the future.” (age 32)

## Results

### Awareness of Mortality

- “I've come to terms with mortality, and... the more I acknowledge our mortality, the more I want to, you know, connect to them, to friends and family, and I'm more willing to kind of take, like, take the good and the bad with people.” (age 37)

### Sense of Urgency To Make Life Decisions

- “I feel like... I do feel a kind of a pressure to have a career and do something with my life and if I'm going to do something in my life better start now. Like, nobody, nobody eats potato chips until they're 60 and then does something cool with their life, like that doesn't happen.” (age 31)

### Limits To Opportunities with Age

- “So, I wish I would have just gone to medical school, initially but also I feel like, I'm 38. I feel that 38 is old enough that maybe going back to square one with medical school would not be the most logical decision at this point. I would do it if I felt like I could still have a long career in front of me rather than behind me. The clock's a-tickin'.” (age 38)

## Discussion

- A person's sense of time horizons, and their perceptions of the achievability and availability of future opportunities, affects important life decisions that can permanently change and shape one's life.
- This study is also consistent with past research on future time perspectives (Dreves & Blackhart, 2019; Lewin, 1942) and accurately reflects Cartensen's (1995, 2006, 2021) socioemotional selectivity theory in that decisions revolve around goals shaped by perceptions of time. Established adulthood may mark the period of the lifespan in which individuals begin to shift from pursuing future-oriented goals to person-centered goals.
- Future research should investigate this topic in established adulthood to provide insight into how perceptions of time and morality directly impact goal-related behaviors and outcomes. Future research should also consider recruiting a larger and more diverse sample size.

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