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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

BONDS | August 26, 2013, 7:22 p.m. ET

A Different Therapy to Find Greater Happiness

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



Instead of dredging up unhappy memories, focus on present, future

Say the words "therapy session" and many people will picture an hour spent on a couch dredging up unhappy childhood memories. A different approach suggests that redirecting the focus onto the present and future can make people happier, healthier and lead to better relationships.



Robert Neubecker

The method, called Time Perspective Therapy, involves figuring out which of six different outlooks a person has: past-positive (you love the past); past-negative (you have regrets and bad things happened in your past—or things that you now exaggerate as bad); present hedonism (you enjoy the present and like to reward yourself); present fatalism (you feel that events are beyond your control, so why bother?); goal-oriented future (you plan ahead and weigh the costs and benefits of any decision); transcendental future (you live a good life because you believe the reward is a heaven after

death).

The best profile to have, says Philip Zimbardo, psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, is a blend of a high level of past-positive, a moderately high level of future orientation and a moderate level of selected present hedonism. In other words, you like your past, work for the future—but not so hard that you become a workaholic—and choose when to seek pleasure in the present. Dr. Zimbardo, an influential thinker in this field who lectures widely, administers a 56-item questionnaire to determine a patient's profile.

The worst time-perspective profile to have is a high level of past-negative coupled with a high level of present fatalism. "These people are living in a negative past and think nothing they do can change it," says Dr. Zimbardo, co-author of the book "The Time Cure." They also score low on present hedonism and have a low future orientation. People who are clinically depressed or have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder typically have this profile.

Our individual time perspective is influenced by many things, including family and friends, culture, religion, education and life events. As very young children, we were all pretty much purely hedonistic—focused on getting what we wanted when we wanted it. Some, but not all, of us

become more future-oriented as we get older.

In a famous study in the 1960s, psychologist Walter Mischel, now a professor at Columbia University, tested the ability of young children to resist temptation for a future goal. He placed one marshmallow in front of each child and explained that they could eat it right away if they wanted, but if they waited about 10 to 15 minutes, they could have a second one to eat. About half the children gobbled up the treat right away; the other half managed to hold out for a second marshmallow.

The time perspective that the children had when they were young had a large impact on the way they behaved later in life. Dr. Mischel followed up with the children when they were teens, and then in middle age. The individuals who resisted the marshmallow at roughly ages 4 and 5 performed better in school, scored an average of about 250 points higher on their SATs and had happier family lives. Those who ate the marshmallow immediately had more emotional problems throughout their lives.

The good news, says Dr. Zimbardo: People can change their time perspective. Between 2004 and 2012, Time Perspective Therapy was administered by Dr. Zimbardo's co-authors Rick and Rosemary Sword, therapists in Maui, to 32 veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, all of whom had been through other therapies without positive results. All 32 saw a significant decrease in anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms.

A person can raise a past-positive score, Dr. Zimbardo says, by focusing on the good in your past: create photo albums, write letters of gratitude to people who inspired you, start an oral history of your family.

Your future orientation can get a boost by organizing your calendar or planning a family vacation, actions that get you to envision and plan for a positive future. And volunteering or becoming a mentor can help you see that your actions can have a positive impact.

And you can increase your present hedonism—selectively!—by doing something to balance your mood, such as exercise or a nature walk. Also, reward your hard work with an activity you enjoy: dinner with a friend, a massage, an afternoon playing your favorite sport.

To lower your past-negative scores you can work to silence your pessimistic inner critic by meditating or keeping an ongoing list of all the good things in your life right now. "It's thinking about what's good in your life now, rather than what was bad in your life then," says Dr. Zimbardo.

And you can reduce your future fatalistic perspective by learning a new skill or hobby that allows you to see your change, and doing it with a partner—it's less isolating and the other person can give you positive feedback.

Dominic Monahan not surprisingly had a negative perspective after he was laid off from his job as a project manager at a printing press manufacturer in 2009, and moved into his mother's suburban Chicago basement. He sent out hundreds of resumes—and landed no interviews. "I had no hope and was living in the past," says the 42-year-old. "I was ready to give up."

Mr. Monahan admits he was always pretty focused on present gratification. He preferred to ride his mountain bike, run, hunt, "or do anything" instead of studying. He dropped out of college, joined the Navy and held a series of technician jobs after he got out. He says he tried college several more times without graduating.

He tried psychotherapy after he lost his job, but quit because he felt it was just paying someone to listen to him complain. While he didn't try Time Perspective Therapy specifically, his experience shows how the method can help a person recover from a downward spiral.

He eventually gained 60 pounds (eating peanut butter by the spoonful) and began sleeping 18 hours a day. When he outgrew his sweatpants, he says, he decided to turn his life around. He signed up for an online finance degree, and the condensed classes helped him to feel he was making progress. He recently graduated. He also got a temporary consulting job at a company that uses new technology to purify wastewater.

He started to exercise and took up the martial art Tae Kwan Do. His instructor, who is also a psychologist, taught him to talk back to his negative inner voice. Now, when he starts ruminating on mistakes he's made in the past, or tells himself there is no hope, he says out loud: "Stop...This behavior is not going to move us in a positive direction or make us happy."

Mr. Monahan still lives with his mom. He has lost 35 pounds and says his hunt for a financial analyst position and his goal of achieving more Tae Kwan Do belts keep him focused on the future.

The small steps he took all added up and "helped me get out of the negative past, be in the present and plan for the future," he says. "Over time they started to change my subconscious into believing there is hope."

A Path to Happiness

To determine what steps people should take to boost their happiness, the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory questionnaire asks people to rate 56 statements, including the seven below, as very true, true, neutral, false or very false. For the full quiz, visit www.thetimeparadox.com

I believe that a person's day should be planned ahead each morning

It gives me pleasure to think about my past

When listening to my favorite music, I often lose all track of time.

It upsets me to be late for appointments.

I've taken my share of abuse and rejection in the past.

It is important to put excitement in my life

Taking risks keeps my life from becoming boring

Source: Philip Zimbardo, Stanford University

—Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at Bonds@wsj.com or follow her column at www.Facebook.com/EBernsteinWSJ.

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