

BRAIN QUIRK MAY PREVENT US FROM ENVISIONING OUR FUTURE

Happy New Year! For 2013 I have made some resolutions that I hope will improve my life. Perhaps you have too. As I was thinking about these changes I started thinking about the things in my past that have caused me to be the way I am; these must be the things that need changing. But the real point of making changes is to be good to our future selves – to improve our wellbeing as we enter our next years of life. So I tried to look into my future. Happily, I found that I quite like my present self, and that I would be OK to be in roughly the same place (maybe just a bit fitter or richer) in future. Is it possible that I have finally reached that point in my life where I want to be? That I have worked toward all these years? Or am I just better at assessing the past than I am at predicting the future?

New Neuroscience research with over 19,000 participants suggests we are all pretty bad at determining what our future selves would want – most people appear to believe that the present marks the point at which they have finally stopped changing. And what's more, this is not dependent on age. Although we like to think that teenagers are exceptionally bad at predicting what's good for their future selves ("Of course these piercings will always look good on me!"), the study showed that people in their late 50s and 60s were not much better. Sixty-eight year-olds could identify many ways they had changed since they were 58. But when 58 year-olds were asked if they would change much between now and when they become 68, they predicted virtually no change. Yet, these same 58 year-olds could identify heaps of changes that took place since they were 48. Researchers then used a real-life example to demonstrate how this might affect our financial situation. Participants were asked how much they would be willing to pay to see their current favourite band play in 2022, and compared that with how much participants would be willing to pay right now to see the band that was their favourite ten years ago. People on average would pay 61-percent more to see their current favourite in the future. Again, showing that we are keenly aware that we have changed, but not that we will continue to change.

Surely we don't want to spend time constantly un-doing the choices that our previous selves made. Psychologists recommend looking to the lives of people older than ourselves to get an idea of how life choices may turn out - "Check out that 68 year-old with the piercings!"

Reference: Quoidbach et al. (2013) "The End of History Illusion" *Science* 339: 96-98.