

Dinner with the in-laws: Why does knowing how long a bad experience will last make it worse?

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Knowing how long a good experience will last makes it better, but being aware of the duration of an unpleasant event makes it worse, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. But people usually predict the opposite effect.

"Which is more enjoyable, knowing the exact duration of a dinner with a charming friend or not knowing it? What if the dinner is with disliked in-laws?" ask authors Min Zhao and Claire I. Tsai (University of Toronto). People often assume that knowing the duration of a pleasant event will "kill the fun," whereas knowing the duration of an unpleasant event makes it tolerable. But the authors' new study contradicts this lay understanding.

"Rather than weakening affective episodes over time, duration knowledge actually intensifies them, rendering a positive experience more pleasurable and a negative experience more aversive," the authors explain.

The authors conducted a field study in a Taiwanese "cram school," an after-school program designed to help [middle school students](#) meet academic goals. They told half the students that the session would last 60 minutes and told the other half that the session would be similar to after-hours sessions they had attended in the past (which vary from 30-90 minutes). "The results show that whereas students predicted that duration

knowledge would improve their negative experience, in fact it rendered the experience worse."

The authors also conducted a lab experiment where participants listened to 30-second song clips sung either by a pop star or one of the researchers "who sings abominably." They found that people who knew the duration of the experience had more intense reactions in both directions.

In subsequent experiments the authors found that counting down during a positive experience weakens the enjoyment of participants but helps improve [negative experiences](#). "Counting down an activity directs attention away from the activity to its end," the authors write.

"Duration knowledge prompts people to consider the state in which the ongoing experience terminates: an undesirable future state for pleasurable experiences and a desirable one for unpleasant experiences," the authors conclude.

More information: Cecile K. Cho and Venkataramani Johar. "Attaining Satisfaction." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2011 (published online April 19, 2011). Further information: ejcr.org

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