

There's a better way to think about being kept waiting at work

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While no one at work wants to be kept waiting, according to a new study by researchers from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) and the University of British Columbia (UBC), reactions to waiting can be managed to reduce aggression that may result from the wait.

"We spend a part of our daily life waiting, and unfortunately, wait time can fuel aggressive tendencies," says Dr. Dorit Efrat-Treister, from the BGU Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management. "Our study examines the relationship between wait time, perceived wait time, and aggressive tendencies from a construal level perspective."

Construal level refers to how abstract or concrete people perceive, comprehend and interpret the world around them.

Generally, abstract thinking leads to better outcomes, such as more creativity, wider vision and feeling more powerful. However, in the paper published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2020), Efrat-Triester, and UBC researchers Michael Daniels and Sandra Robinson demonstrate that abstract thinking can also lead to undesired outcomes in [stressful situations](#), such as waiting.

"For example, if you are waiting for someone who is late to meet you, you are better off thinking in concrete terms, like assuming they got stuck in a traffic jam compared with abstract terms, like assuming they are disrespecting you," Efrat-Treister says. "When someone is late for a call, if you think abstractly, you may think they don't respect your time, or they don't think the call is important, and therefore you might become mad. But if you think they may have just misplaced your number or got another call first, you won't become so annoyed."

In the experiments, the researchers arranged a meeting of people in a lab and each were told their partner was late. Sitting in separate rooms, each waited for 30 seconds, five minutes or 10 minutes. Those that were prompted to think abstractly perceived the waiting time as longer, and reacted more aggressively than those that were led to think concretely.

Generation Y and Z participants had an especially difficult time in the experiment without their [cell phone](#) and started banging on the desks or

fidgiting, and self-reported high levels of aggression after waiting for even short durations of time.

"We showed that the level of abstractness influences how long or short one perceives actual wait time. Therefore, we can influence the perception of the wait time and thus manage aggression," Efrat-Treister says.

It can be both costly and difficult for organizations to reduce wait time and can require additional resources that may not be available. As the study shows, managers can reduce the perception of wait time without adding resources by priming people to think more concretely and distracting them from the time that has passed.

"For example, medical offices might want to install video monitors with concrete information that distracts from long [wait times](#)," Efrat-Treister says. "The leader of a meeting can focus on getting started and on the agenda rather than focusing on why a partner is late. Any concrete focus that prevents abstract thinking about waiting can be helpful."

More information: Dorit Efrat-Treister et al, Putting time in perspective: How and why construal level buffers the relationship between wait time and aggressive tendencies, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2433](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2433)

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