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# How experiencing and anticipating temporal landmarks influence motivation

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Temporal landmarks, or moments that stand out in time, structure people's perceptions and use of time. We highlight recent research examining how both experiencing and anticipating temporal landmarks impact motivation and goal pursuit. Experiencing a temporal landmark may produce a 'fresh start effect', making people feel more motivated to pursue their goals right after the landmark. Anticipating a future landmark may also increase people's current motivation if they are reminded of an ideal future state. We review one prominent explanation underlying these findings: temporal landmarks can create a psychological separation between past, current, and future selves. We also propose other possible explanations and discuss circumstances under which experiencing and anticipating temporal landmarks may cease to be motivating, or even harm motivation.

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## Introduction

People's lives are demarcated by temporal landmarks, events that 'stand in marked contrast to the seemingly unending stream of trivial and ordinary occurrences' [1]. Temporal landmarks organize people's time perceptions, memories, and activities by creating mental accounting periods [1–3]. In this article, we review recent research about how *experiencing* and *anticipating* temporal landmarks influence motivation and goal pursuit.

## Temporal landmarks

Three common types of temporal landmarks include transition points of a social timetable (e.g. the start of a new week, month, year, or semester), momentous life

events (e.g. a birthday, a wedding), or significant public events (e.g. a national election). Similar to geographical landmarks that aid physical orientation, temporal landmarks organize memories and experiences in time [1,2]. By creating boundaries between temporal periods, they influence the way people recall the past [1,4–6], experience the present [7], and plan for the future [8\*].

## Psychological separation induced by temporal landmarks

In opening new mental accounting periods, temporal landmarks generate a sense of psychological disconnect between people's past, current, and future selves [8\*,9,10\*]. Researchers have noted that temporal landmarks — which may include anything from a holiday to a new job — lead people to feel more distant and different from their past or future selves [8\*,9,11–13]. This sense of contrast between temporal selves is particularly noticeable when landmark events are highlighted, either by an external source [8\*] or by individuals themselves [10\*].

## Experiencing temporal landmarks

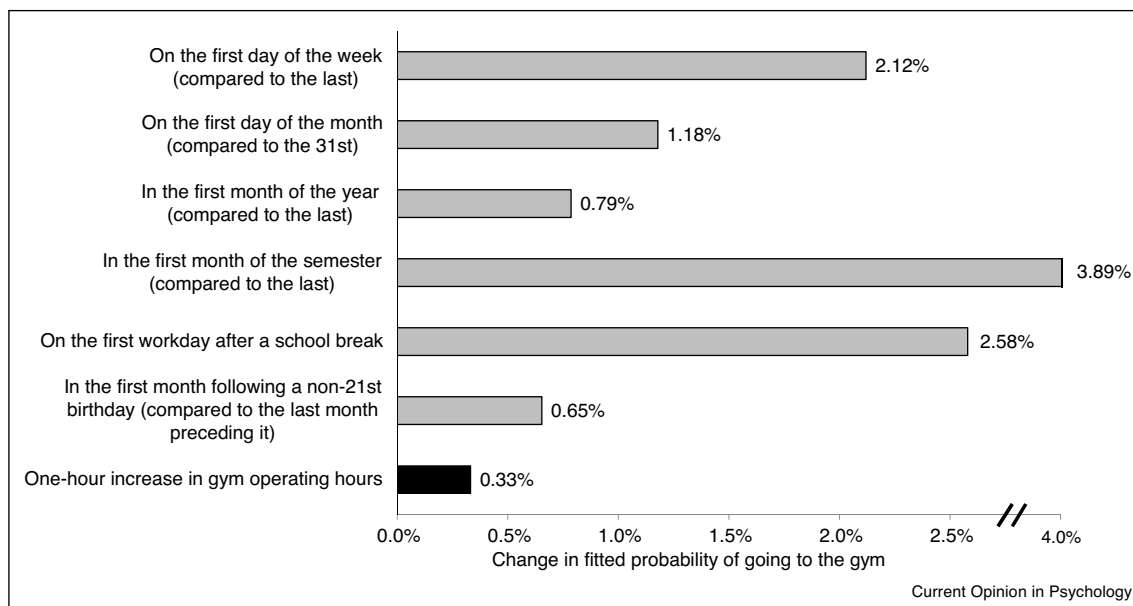
Experiencing a temporal landmark may shape perceptions of the self and subsequently affect behavior. In this section, we review research on how motivation changes after people experience a temporal landmark.

### The 'fresh start effect'

How does the feeling of psychological disconnect between temporal selves generated by temporal landmarks affect motivation? When a temporal landmark occurs and separates the past and present selves, it creates a clean slate and allows people to relegate their missteps to the past [14\*,15\*]. This process may lead people to evaluate their current self in a more flattering light relative to the flawed past self, and consequently feel more confident [16]. The elevated confidence provides the impetus for people to strive toward their goals with renewed vigor in the present [17]. Additionally, people may more actively avoid deviating from their goals after experiencing a temporal landmark to avoid ruining the clean slate created by the landmark [18,19]. These reasons suggest that the disassociation between a person's past and present selves can increase motivation after a temporal landmark arises — a phenomenon referred to as the 'fresh start effect' [14\*,15\*].

Indeed, field studies across different samples show that people are more likely to engage in goal-related activities immediately after temporal landmarks, compared to ordinary days [14\*]. For instance, researchers have

Figure 1



Gym attendance increases following a temporal landmark. This figure shows estimated changes in the fitted probability of a student going to the gym on a given day as a function of the date and its proximity to a variety of temporal landmarks [15\*]. These effects are compared to the effect of a one-hour increase in the gym's operating hours on the likelihood of going to the gym.

documented notable increases in gym attendance, online searches for diet-related information, and the creation of goal commitment contracts at the beginnings of weeks, months, and semesters, after holidays, school breaks, and birthdays [14\*] (see Figure 1 for an example). Extending this evidence from observational data, follow-up research has presented causal evidence from laboratory experiments suggesting that temporal landmarks lead people to engage in goal-related activities by increasing the psychological distance between the imperfect past self and the current self [15\*].

#### Alternative explanations for increased motivation after temporal landmarks

In addition to the sharper psychological disconnect between past and current selves, there may be other explanations for the boost in motivation after the experience of a temporal landmark. First, temporal landmarks may induce a 'big picture' mindset by interrupting day-to-day minutiae. A focus on the 'big picture' directs attention to high-level, goal-relevant information, increasing people's motivation to achieve their aspirations [20–22]. Second, some temporal landmarks are associated with breaks and relaxation (e.g. Mondays after the weekend, post-holidays associated with holiday breaks) that provide chances to renew energy and motivation [23–25]. Finally, certain temporal landmarks (e.g. a move to a new city, a transfer to a new college) are associated with changes in environmental stimuli, which can break old habits and establish new, positive ones [26].

#### Adverse effects of experiencing temporal landmarks on motivation

Despite its motivating effects, experiencing a temporal landmark can also produce adverse effects on motivation. For instance, temporal landmarks may induce a mental contrast with previous successes and discourage individuals with consistent high achievement in the past [27\*]. Additionally, temporal landmarks associated with changes in the surrounding environments may remove recurring cues that trigger habit performance, thus disrupting positive habits [26]. In particular, if an individual has proven responsive to an intervention and has already begun to build a habit, a temporal landmark that changes her circumstances (e.g. a school break during which a college student returns home) may reverse the positive effects of the learned positive behavior [28,29].

#### Anticipating temporal landmarks

In addition to effects produced through the *experience* of temporal landmarks, the *anticipation* of temporal landmarks also impacts decision-making. In this section, we review research about how future temporal landmarks affect motivation.

#### Future temporal landmarks and planning for goal initiation

Research suggests that people view future temporal landmarks as favorable times to initiate goal pursuit. In a recent study by Dai *et al.* [15\*], people chose to receive a goal reminder (a goal initiation activity) on March 20 more

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