

Thickening Time

How to Stop Your Life from Disappearing

What This Book Is About

by Andrew Mayfield

The Problem

I notice certain people. People roughly my age who seem to have time for everything. Not retired. Not idle. Busy, in fact. But there's an ease to them. They walk their dogs. They look healthy. Their smiles are brighter. They get things done without the frantic edge I recognise in myself. I don't feel envious of these people. I feel curious. What are they doing differently?

I've tried the usual recommendations. Exercise more. Meditate. Read about productivity. Every single one of those things probably works, in theory. But every single one also becomes another thing to remember, another thing to fit into an already full day. I've tried them. They've faded. All of them.

I wanted something different. I wanted to understand what's actually happening. Not the self-help version, the real version. The science of why five years can feel like one. The mechanics of how a decade disappears. And, if it exists, the evidence for how to get the feeling back.

I want to notice my life while I'm living it. I want less blur when I look backwards. I want things to slow down. But here's what I found when I went looking for answers: you can't slow time down. But you can make it thicker.

The Two Clocks

The first thing you need to understand is that there are two completely different ways that time disappears. They feel similar. They produce the same vague dread. But they run on different machinery.

The first is what researchers call prospective time. This is time as you experience it in the moment. When a Wednesday afternoon at your desk feels like it's lasted about forty-five minutes and you look up to find it's nearly six, that's your prospective clock running fast. This clock is governed mostly by attention. The more attention you give to time itself, the slower it goes.

The second is retrospective time. This is time as you reconstruct it from memory. It's the clock you consult when you look back at a month, a year, a decade, and

judge how long it felt. This clock is governed not by attention but by memory. Specifically, by how many distinct, retrievable memories you formed during the period.

These two clocks often run in opposite directions.

Think about a holiday. A really good one. While you're there, the days seem to fly. Your prospective clock is running fast because you're absorbed. But then you come home. And when you think back on that week, it feels long. Dense. Full of distinct images and moments you can actually recall. Your retrospective clock says that week was substantial.

Now think about a normal week at work. Same commute. Same desk. Same meetings. While you're living it, the days can feel slow. You're checking the clock. But at the end of that week? It's gone. You can barely distinguish it from the week before. Your brain didn't bother encoding separate memories for events it had already filed a thousand times.

This is called the holiday paradox. And it explains why everyone over thirty seems to know the same

story: time speeds up as you get older. The story is comforting in a bleak sort of way. If time acceleration is inevitable, then there's nothing to be done about it. The story is also wrong.

Time doesn't speed up because you're getting older. Time speeds up because your life has become more predictable, more demanding, and less novel. Your attention is fragmented. Your stress is high. Your days look the same. Your brain, which is ruthlessly efficient, stops encoding what it already knows.

This version of the story isn't comforting in the way the old one was. You can't shrug and say "that's just ageing." But it's liberating in a way the old one never could be. Because if time acceleration is driven by lifestyle rather than biology, it means you can change it.

Thick Time, Not Slow Time

The goal isn't to slow time down. It's to make it thicker. Thick time isn't slow time. It's dense time. Time where the ratio of conscious experience to minutes elapsed is high. Where your brain is processing, encoding,

feeling, and storing at full capacity. The minutes might fly by. But the memories they leave behind are substantial.

Think about the best moments of your life. The ones where you were fully alive, completely absorbed. In those moments, time didn't slow down. It sped up. The hours evaporated. And yet, when you look back on them, they feel enormous. They occupy more space in your memory than entire months of ordinary living.

Most of us are living in thin time and calling it fast time. We think the problem is speed. It's not. The problem is density.

The Three Levers

If thicker time is the goal, we need a map. Something clear enough to act on and simple enough to remember. Everything in the research points to three systems that determine whether your time is thick or thin. They operate independently, but they compound.

The first lever is your body. Your nervous system sets the tempo of your temporal experience. This isn't

metaphorical. Your heartbeat is a literal timekeeper. Your heart rate variability determines how stable and accurate your temporal perception is. Your circadian rhythm dictates when you're capable of deep engagement and when you're running on fumes. When the body is regulated, rested, and fit, your temporal resolution is high. When the body is stressed, depleted, and running on cortisol, days blur.

The second lever is your mind. Your brain's encoding system determines how much gets recorded and how richly. When you encounter something new, your brain pays attention. When you pay attention, your brain encodes deeply. When encoding is deep, the experience leaves a substantial footprint in memory. When your days are routine, your brain coasts. When you're constantly interrupted, encoding is shallow. The day happened. It just didn't register.

The third lever is your architecture. The structure of your life determines how much bandwidth you have for the first two levers. It doesn't matter how well you understand the body and mind levers if your life is structured in a way that leaves you no

bandwidth to use them. Architecture is the school run that eats your morning. The campervan that needs constant repairs. The inbox that demands constant triage. Every unresolved structural drain consumes attention, energy, and cognitive bandwidth that could otherwise be directed toward thick time.

The three levers don't just add up. They multiply. A well-regulated body gives you the energy and neural capacity to engage deeply with novel experiences. Deep engagement creates rich memories. Rich memories create the felt sense of a substantial life. But none of that can happen if your life's architecture is consuming all your bandwidth on logistics and obligations.

When time feels thin, ask three questions: Is my body regulated? Is my mind engaged? Is my architecture clean? Most of the time, when I audit honestly, at least one of these is badly off. Often two. The good news is that you don't have to fix all three at once. Even a single lever, adjusted, changes the output.

What Changes

This isn't about finding a morning routine or adding meditation to an already overloaded schedule. It's about understanding the actual mechanisms and redesigning the inputs. Some of it is surprisingly simple. Your heartbeat affects your perception of time, and you can train your heart rate variability through a specific kind of breathing that takes ten minutes. Cold exposure changes your nervous system's baseline regulation. Moving your body regularly gives your brain the fuel to process time richly. Protecting blocks of uninterrupted attention from the forces designed to fragment it.

Some of it is more structural. Removing the drains that consume bandwidth without producing value. Creating distinct chapters in your life so memory has something to retrieve. Seeking novelty not as grand adventure but as regular deviation from what your brain already knows. Playing again. Finding awe in daily experience. Facing the finite nature of time not as panic but as clarity.

The Person at Fifty

I notice that I'm forty-seven. In three years, I'll be fifty. The question I keep returning to is: what do I want the person at fifty to feel like? Not look like. Not have accomplished. Feel like.

I want to remember the next three years. Not in the abstract way I remember my thirties, where the decade compresses into a highlight reel. I want to feel the weight of each year. I want my days to have contour. I want less residue. I want to play. And I want to feel time passing through me at a pace I can perceive, with a richness I can register.

None of this requires a radical life change. I'm staying in my life, the life I chose and continue to choose, and adjusting the density of experience within it. The transformation isn't in the circumstances. It's in the resolution. Same life. Higher definition.

I wrote this book because I wanted to read it. What I found surprised me. The years don't have to vanish. The blur isn't inevitable. And the people with the

bright smiles who seem to have time for everything haven't found a secret. They've built, gradually and often unconsciously, lives that produce thick time as a natural output.

The book is my attempt to make that building process conscious, deliberate, and replicable. Because I've got plenty of life ahead of me. I know that. But I want the next decade to feel like a decade. I want to build things again, ambitious things, without losing myself inside them. I want to experience it, not just complete it.

Your time is thick or thin by design, not by accident. And design is a choice you make daily, not once.

This gives you the shape of the book. What it can't give you is the texture — the science that makes the ideas stick, and the practices that make them real.

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