

GUEST ESSAY

How Covid Stole Our Time and How We Can Get It Back

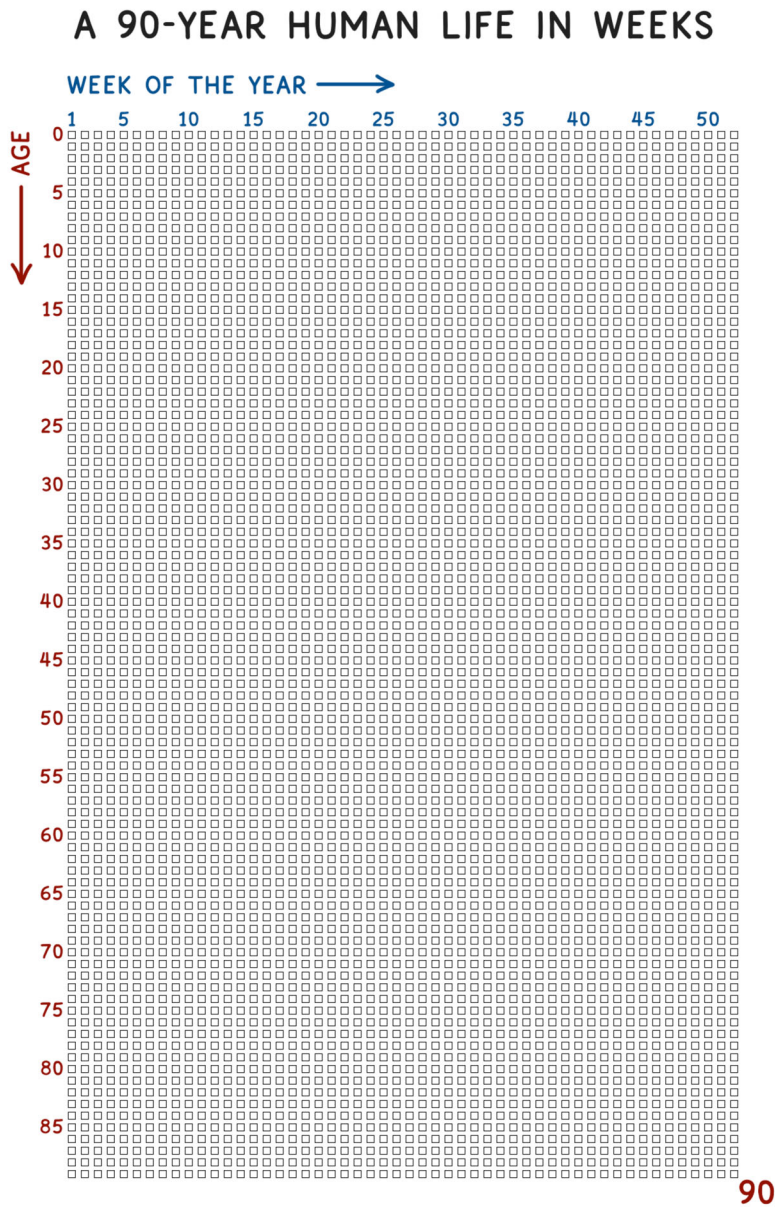
Feb. 25, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

By Tim Urban

Mr. Urban is the author of Wait But Why, a stick-figure-illustrated blog about almost everything. He first wrote about the idea of “Depressing Math” in 2015.

I have good news and bad news for you. Let’s start with the bad: a concept I call Depressing Math.

Check this out:



That's one box for every week of a 90-year life. It often feels like we have countless weeks ahead of us. But actually, it's just a few thousand — a small-enough number to fit neatly in a single image.

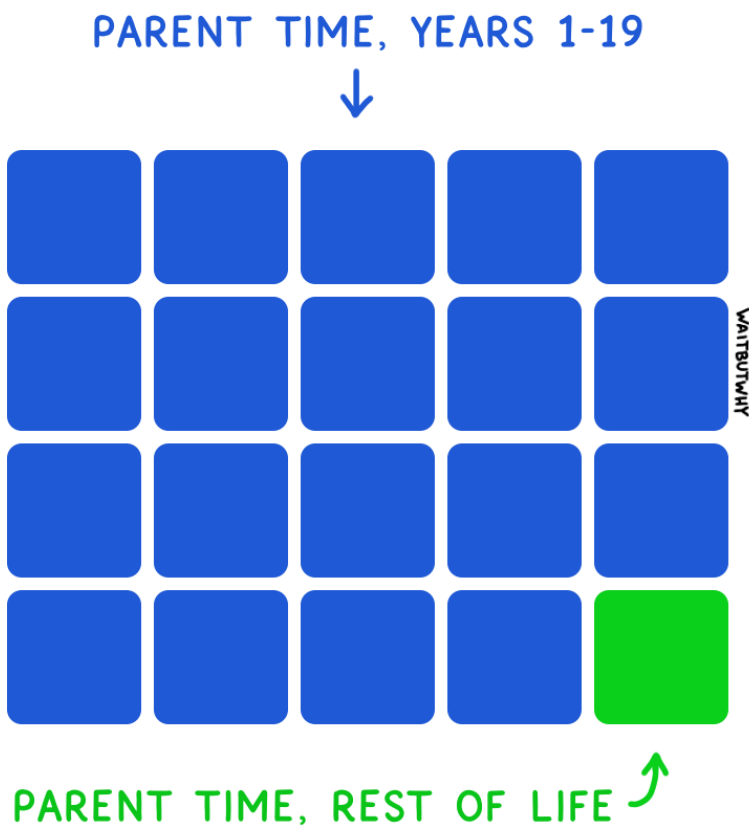
Once you visualize the human life span, it becomes clear that so many parts of life we think of as “countless” are in fact quite countable.

I love going to the American Museum of Natural History, and I've been three times since I moved to New York in 2009. If that rate continues, I'll step into the museum 12 more times. For an activity I think of as “something I like to do,” that number seems shockingly low. I also love going to the movies, but ever since it became effortless to stream everything at home, I've been averaging one or two movie theater trips a year. In my head, I'll go out for hundreds more movies in my life, but the real amount is probably some weirdly small number like 53.

Depressing Math is especially depressing when you're living through a pandemic. Covid hasn't taken away our weeks, but it has robbed us of our favorite activities — experiences that are already in short supply.

But perhaps the hardest math to process — and, in turn, the hardest Covid pill to swallow — has to do with our relationships. I grew up spending some time with my parents almost every day. Since turning 19 and moving away for good, I've averaged about 10 to 15 days a year with them. If I'm one of the lucky ones, I'll have quality time with my parents until I'm 60. That means that the day I headed off to college, I had something like 350 remaining parent days *total* — the amount of time I had with them *every year* of my childhood.

What it boils down to is this: My life, in the best-case scenario, will consist of around 20 years of in-person parent time. The first 19 happened over the course of my first 19 years. The final year is spread out over the rest of my life. When I left for college, I had many decades left with living parents, but only about one year of time left to spend *with* them.



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It's the same story with childhood friends. I spent high school sitting around with the same four friends, notching somewhere around 1,000 hangouts by the time we scattered off to different cities. Since then, our text thread keeps us in touch, but we've only managed to get the whole group together for a weekend every few years — about 10 total days each decade. It feels like we're smack in the middle of our lives together, but like me and my parents, the high school group is currently enjoying its final 5 percent of in-person time together.

Depressing Math reveals a cold truth: While you may not be anywhere near the end of your life, you may very well be nearing the end of your time spent with some of the most important people in your life.

OPINION CONVERSATION

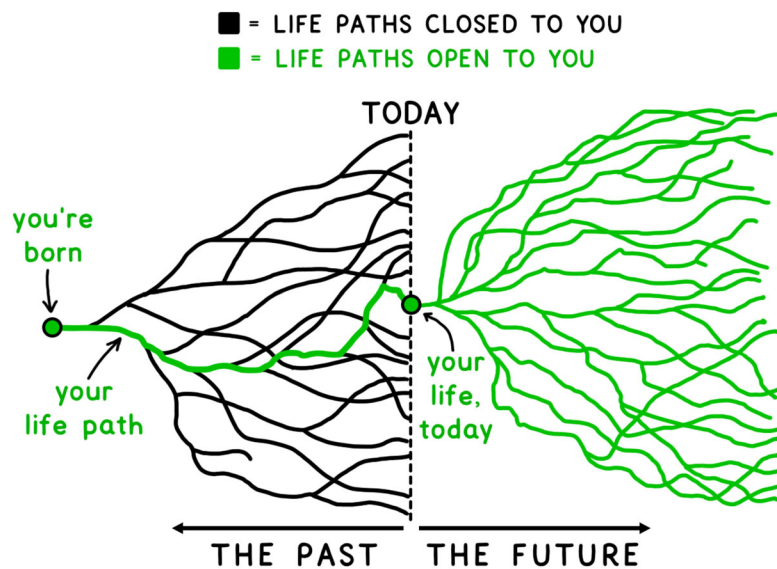
What will work and life look like after the pandemic?

- **Is the answer to a fuller life working less?**
Jonathan Malesic argues that your job, or lack of one, doesn't define your human worth.
- **What do we lose when we lose the office?**
William D. Cohan, a former investment banker, wonders how the next generation will learn and grow professionally.
- **How can we reduce unnecessary meetings?**
Priya Parker explores why structuring our time is more complicated than ever.
- **You'll probably have fewer friends after the pandemic. Is that normal?**
Kate Murphy, the author of "You're Not Listening," asks whether your kid's soccer teammate's parents were really the friends you needed.

The pandemic has only added to the sting. In my family, Thanksgiving is the ultimate unskippable event, but over the past two years, we've skipped it twice because of Covid. Considering that there may only be 10 or 15 more Thanksgivings for us to be all together, two is a pretty big piece of that pie.

In the months ahead, as you prepare to make plans — or to cancel them — I encourage you to do some Depressing Math of your own. Because whatever your situation, delusion about the time we have left serves no one.

Now for the good news:



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We think a lot about those black lines: the roads not taken, the opportunities missed, the ones that got away. But most of us greatly underestimate the size of the lush green tree of possibilities that lie ahead of us.

We underestimate future possibilities for the same reason we overestimate the time we have left with those we love: our intuition is not very imaginative. It's a human instinct to believe the life we're used to is how things will always be, both the good parts and the bad.

Wallowing in regret carries an implicit assumption that we had agency in the past — that we could have *had* those other life paths if only we had made better decisions. When we think about the future, though, that feeling of agency often disappears, which can leave us feeling resigned and even hopeless.

But the life we'll be living 10 years from now will largely be determined not by our past selves but by our present and future selves. If we imagine what we might regret down the road, it's very much in our hands to do something about it now.

This is the good news about being a human. The time we have left with family and friends is not a law of nature like the weeks we have left to live. It's a function of priorities and decisions.

At our current pace of 10 to 15 days per year, my parents and I have at best a couple of hundred days left to hang out. But there's nothing stopping us from changing that equation. Agreeing upon an additional annual family week each summer would almost double our remaining time together, while moving to the same city could multiply it by 10. Getting together with my friends one weekend a year would triple our pace and leave us with 15 percent of our total hangout time ahead, instead of just 5 percent. If the thought of only 12 more Museum of Natural History visits makes me sad, I can start going once a year and magically transform that number to 50. That big green tree is a reminder that we have the power to change so much of what seems set in stone.

These two delusions — that we have countless time ahead of us and that we can't change our course — are a recipe for complacency. Shedding them can wake us up and inspire us to live more wisely. The past couple of years has left us with a joy deficit. When we picture a post-Covid world, we imagine having our old lives back. But we can actually go a step further and make up for the missed experiences, flipping the deficit into a surplus. If Covid has given us anything, it's a rare chance for a reset. Let's take it.

Tim Urban (@waitbutwhy) is the author and illustrator of the blog Wait But Why, where he explores topics ranging from aliens to marriage to A.I., and its accompanying newsletter.

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