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Future Perfect

By Melissa Kirsch

“Once you see it, you can’t unsee it,” my colleague Steven Kurutz told me this week. He was talking about the phenomenon of people increasingly backing their cars into parking spots, [the subject of his recent investigation](#). “Fifteen or 20 years ago, it seemed that everyone parked the same way,” he said. Now, in any supermarket lot, he said, you’ll find some percentage of people parked so that their car is facing out.

In suburban parking lots outside New York City, he encountered the same mind-set repeatedly: Backing in makes it easier to get out. “You’re going to back up coming or going,” Steven wrote. “Backer-inners, it seemed, preferred doing the harder maneuver first.”

Doing the harder thing now so that you’ll have an easier time later is a fundamental concept in self-improvement communities. In Reddit communities like [r/DecidingToBeBetter](#) and [r/GetDisciplined](#), you’ll find people talking about doing favors for their future selves. They might try to think of their future self as a friend or someone they love, on the premise that it can be easier to do something kind for another person than to do it for oneself. The backer-inners are thinking about their future selves, performing the fussier parking job now so that Future Them can reap the benefits of getting on the road faster.

It can feel like a drag to do something uncomfortable now in order to reap the benefits later — see: saving for retirement, going to the gym. In some cases, the future payoff feels worth it; in others, not so much. I watch the way I alternately take care of Future Me and then sabotage her nearly every night. I clean the kitchen and tidy the house before going to bed. No matter how much I’d prefer to leave it for morning, I load the dishwasher, wipe down the counters, arrange the pillows on the couch so that Future Me will wake up to a scene of order. I know Future Me, and she finds starting the day with a mess of dirty dishes a total bummer.

Future Me also hates being tired. But that doesn’t stop me, nearly every night, from partaking in “revenge bedtime procrastination,” staying up late reading and watching true crime

documentaries after I've gotten into bed, reveling in the agency of "me time," in which I am answerable to no one but myself. "I stay up late at night 'cause I'm 'Night Guy,'" goes an old [Jerry Seinfeld bit](#). "Night Guy wants to stay up late. 'What about getting up after five hours of sleep?' Oh, that's Morning Guy's problem." Night Guy is Present Me, staying up to finish the book even though it's nearly 2 a.m. Morning Guy is Future Me, in for a rough wake-up.

"When will the future me arrive?" one user asked Reddit's [r/SelfImprovement](#) community, unsure if present sacrifice was worth some theoretical future gain. "Realize you are future you to past you," another replied. "Have you thanked yourself for everything you've done?"

Deciding to back into the space, taking a few minutes to clean up before bed: These are tiny expressions of care for one's near-future self. We reap the benefits almost immediately after the sacrifice. It can be harder to envision who we'll be decades from now, to really imagine our future selves and invest in setting them up for success. We engage in temporal discounting, valuing the rewards of the present over those of the future. We spend the bonus instead of putting it in a high-yield savings account. We know that our future self awaits, but sometimes we decide to satisfy the present self instead.

Since Steven wrote his parking story, he hasn't become a backer-inner. But he has become a puller-througher, finding two empty spots end-to-end and pulling through one so he's facing out. He found a way to get the future reward without the upfront hassle. Is this cheating? It doesn't seem to be hurting anyone. Where else might this kind of win-win of time and effort be realized? What other, more consequential ways might there be to take care of our future selves without too much discomfort in the present?