

You're Late!

Attitudes to time affect us all in a variety of ways and can be a source of stress for many people. Sometimes it's one person's attitude to time that inflicts stress on others. For example, I've often found myself hanging about the foyer of the Royal Shakespeare theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, waiting for my best friend to arrive. She's nearly always late.

I realised early on in our friendship, that in most situations there was no point in getting upset about her turning up late. We wouldn't be friends if I got stroppy every time she did that. But the theatre is a context where you just can't be late. If you miss curtain up, you can't just stroll in late the way you can in a cinema, for example. So it's really important to be on time. We'd usually arrange to meet 30 minutes before curtain up. But she'd still be late, arriving with just 5 or 10 minutes to go.

The first few times it happened, I got really stressed, annoyed and resentful. I was so focused on the danger that we might miss the start of the play, that I wasn't thinking about anything else. Then she arrived, equally stressed because she was late and resentful of me being annoyed with her. Our different attitudes to time were causing each other stress. Those evenings didn't get off to a good start and detracted from the enjoyment of the play for both of us.

So I started thinking about it. This is what I do now: I make sure that *I* have the tickets, so if she's really late, I can take my seat and leave her ticket with the Box Office. No matter what happens, I'm not going to miss curtain up. So I can relax. If she misses curtain up, that's not my problem. (It took me a while to get that one!) So I can relax. I can even look forward to the play.

Now, when my friend arrives, I'm relaxed and looking forward to the play. If she's stressed about being late, I can help her to calm down, just by being in a good state myself. Do you think this has helped our friendship? Do you think it's helped our enjoyment of our evenings at the theatre?

Now, which side of this story do you relate to most, mine or my friend's? Are you the one who stands around waiting, looking at your watch every 10 seconds and feeling annoyed and self-righteous? Or are you the one who decided to 'just make one more phone call' or 'just tidy the

office' or 'just...' before leaving the house and then spent the whole journey stressing about being late, arriving in a storm of apology, guilt and defensiveness?

It all has to do with how you represent time in your mind. If you're like me, you see events in your mind's eye as movies. Continuous processes that evolve from one another, each taking up an amount of time that can't be occupied by anything else. This is often referred to as a 'through time' representation. If you're like my friend, you'll see events as single snapshots, none of them taking any time at all. This is known as an 'in time' representation.

This difference in how we see time can be the underlying cause of lots of mis-communication, frustration and stress.

If you find it easy to keep track of time, that doesn't actually make you morally superior to people who find it hard. So be generous and work with your 'in time' friends and colleagues to agree time scales and plans. Plan in some small activities that you can take care of if you find yourself waiting for a meeting or phone call to start so that you don't waste your own time and energy on being annoyed if someone else is late.

If you find it hard to be on time, cultivate your ability to plan by paying attention to how long it really takes to do some of those jobs that you think of as taking 'no time at all'. By tracking the time you spend on routine tasks you'll be able to get more realistic about how much you can get done in a day. Or in that last ten minutes before you leave to go somewhere.

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