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## Art Markman, Ph.D.

Executive Editor, Cognitive Science; Psychology and Marketing Professor, UT Austin; Director, the Program in the Human Dimensions of Organizations

## You Are Wiser From a Distance

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What does it mean to be wise? People with great wisdom are able to put events into perspective. Often, that means recognizing that the world never stays the same. The good times will never stay as good as they seem in the moment, and the bad times will get better. It also means recognizing our limits. No matter how smart or hard-working we may be, we don't always have the knowledge we need, and there are many factors outside of our control that influence our successes and failures.

It would be great if there were a simple way for us to get wiser.

Of course, one way to increase our wisdom is just to live longer. Older people have experienced life. They have lived through ups and downs and they have seen their best-laid plans fall apart.

But, wouldn't it be great to find another way to get wiser that didn't require being old?

A [fascinating set of experiments](#) by Ethan Kross and Igor Grossmann in the February 2012 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* suggests that getting some distance from a situation can also make you wiser. They suggest that if you think about a situation as if it were far away in time or space, then you are more likely to recognize that situations change and that there are limits to your ability to control the world.

In one study, they had people think about the economic recession that was influencing the United States at the time the study was carried out. Some participants in the study were asked to think about the recession as it was unfolding at the time. Others were asked to think about the recession as if they were a distant observer from it. Then, the participants spoke to an interviewer about the recession.

The experimenters analyzed what people talked about. Participants who took the perspective that they were immersed in the recession were less wise than those who took a distant perspective. That is, those immersed thinkers felt they had more control and knowledge about the recession than those who were distant, and they also felt that the current conditions were less likely to change than those who were distant.

A second study found a similar pattern among strongly partisan Democrats and Republicans just before the 2008 election. Once again, those who took a distant perspective were more likely to speak with wisdom than those who took a more immersed perspective. In addition, those who took a distant perspective were more likely to say that they would be willing to join a bipartisan group of people to discuss politics than those who took an immersed perspective. Finally, those people who took a distanced perspective expressed less extreme political views at the end of the study than they did at the beginning. The views of those who took an immersed perspective did not change during the study.

The world needs wisdom. Politics in the United States over the past 15 years has been marked by hubris and polarization. There is very little political discussion and precious little compromise. Even among non-politicians, discussions get heated very quickly when people disagree.

Perhaps it is time for all of us to take an outsider's perspective on our problems.

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