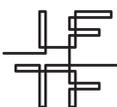


The American Future Gap

A majority of Americans report that they rarely or never think about the far future. What are the implications for this foresight gap, for society and our individual well-being?

A new national survey conducted by IFTF's Jane McGonigal about how often people typically think about the future



SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Institute for the Future conducted an online survey, using Survey Monkey, of 2,818 adults. It was conducted between December 7-13, 2016. Participants were recruited via Facebook and Twitter. Participants who responded to recruitment were aware they would be responding to a survey about future thinking. For this reason, the survey population potentially includes people more interested in thinking about the future than the general population. However, the survey results found low overall rates of thinking about the future. Therefore, taking into account any potential self-selection bias (people who like to think about the future may be more likely to participate in a study about future thinking) would likely strengthen the findings of the survey that the typical American rarely or never thinks about the far-future, and the percentage of “highly future-minded” thinkers in the general public may be lower than this survey reports.

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

Institute for the Future (IFF) is an independent, nonprofit 501(c)(3) strategic research and educational organization celebrating nearly 50 years of forecasting experience. The core of our work is identifying emerging trends and discontinuities that will transform global society and the global marketplace. Our research generates the foresight needed to create insights that lead to action and spans a broad territory of deeply transformative futures, from health and health care to technology, the workplace, learning, and human identity. Learn more at: www.iff.org

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Executive Summary

A new Institute for the Future survey shows that the majority of Americans rarely or never think 30 years into the future, and many rarely even think five years out—a fact that can lead to poor decision-making in people’s daily lives and negative consequences for society.

The online survey of more than 2,800 adults—the largest of its kind to-date—explored how often people think about the future. It found that more than a quarter (27%) of Americans rarely or never think about their lives five years ahead; more than a third (36%) never think about something that could happen 10 years into the future; and more than half (53%) of Americans rarely or never think about their lives 30 years out.

This lack of future thinking does not change with age. In fact, the older people get, the less they think about the future—75% of seniors rarely or never think 30 years out, while 51% rarely or never think 10 years out. However, a brush with mortality—such as a potentially terminal medical diagnosis, a near-death experience, or other traumatic event—does cause people to think more about the future. Among people who reported a brush with mortality, there was a 21% increase in thinking about the 30-year future often, a 25% increase in thinking about the 10-year future often, and a 31% increase in thinking about the 5-year future often.

Only a minority of Americans are highly future-minded. Just 17% say they think about the world 30 years out at least once a week; 29% think about the 10-year future at least once a week, and 35% think about the 5-year future at least once a week.

This leaves us with a kind of “future gap” in America. Some people are regularly connecting with their future selves while a greater majority are not. And this matters, because the consequences of a lack of forethought can be profound in both our personal lives and our collective wellbeing. Studies show^{1,2,3,4,5} the less people think about their future lives, the less self-control they exhibit and the less likely they are to

make choices that benefit the world in the long-run. People who don’t think about the future vote less often, save less for retirement, make poor health decisions, procrastinate more, have a harder time resisting temptation, are more likely to drop out of school or be arrested, care less about long-term challenges like climate change, show less resilience in the face of tough obstacles, as reported in the scientific literature on the impact of future thinking.

Survey participants were aware they would be responding to a survey about future thinking. For this reason, the survey population potentially includes people more interested in thinking about the future than the general population. However, the survey results found low overall rates of thinking about the future. Therefore, taking into account any potential self-selection bias (people who like to think about the future may be more likely to participate in a study about future thinking) would likely strengthen the findings of the survey that the typical American rarely or never thinks about the far-future, and the percentage of “highly future-minded” thinkers in the general public may be lower than this survey reports.

Thinking about the 5-year, 10-year, and 30-year future is essential to being engaged citizens and creative problem-solvers. Curiosity about what might happen in the future, the ability to imagine how things could be different, and empathy for our future selves are all necessary if we want to create change in our own lives or the world around us. These survey results suggest a significant opportunity for positive intervention nationwide, to teach future-thinking skills and habits in order to increase the frequency with which Americans consider their future lives.

1. Bromberg, Uli, Antonius Wiehler, and Jan Peters. “Episodic future thinking is related to impulsive decision making in healthy adolescents.” *Child development* 86.5 (2015): 1458-1468.
2. Arnocky, Steven, Taciato L. Milfont, and Jeffrey R. Nicol. “Time perspective and sustainable behavior: Evidence for the distinction between consideration of immediate and future consequences.” *Environment and Behavior* 46.5 (2014): 556-582.
3. Peters, Jan, and Christian Büchel. “Episodic future thinking reduces reward delay discounting through an enhancement of prefrontal-mediocortical interactions.” *Neuron* 66.1 (2010): 138-148.
4. Ersner-Hersfield, Hal, G. Elliott Wimmer, and Brian Knutson. “Saving for the future self: Neural measures of future self-continuity predict temporal discounting.” *Social cognitive and affective neuroscience* 4.1 (2009): 85-92.
5. Fowler, James H., and Cindy D. Kam. “Patience as a political virtue: Delayed gratification and turnout.” *Political Behavior* 28.2 (2006): 113-128.



Key Findings

Thinking 30 years out is rare—**53%** of Americans say they rarely or never think about something that might happen, or something they personally might do, at least 30 years from the present. Only **10%** think about the far future every day (**5%**) or several times a week (**5%**).

Looking 10 years ahead is somewhat less rare—**36%** rarely or never think about something that might happen at least 10 years in the future, while **17%** say they think that far out every day (**7%**) or several times a week (**10%**).

Thinking five years into the future is more common—**27%** rarely or never think about their lives at least five years from the present, while **26%** say they think five years out every day (**11%**) or several times a week (**15%**).

Considering the future three years out is more common still—**13%** think about the future three years out every day, with another **20%** thinking about it several times a week; **18%** say they rarely (**12%**) or almost never (**6%**) think about what might happen three years in the future.

Looking ahead one year happens often—**26%** think about something that might happen one year in the future every day, and another **30%** think about it several times a week.

The majority of Americans frequently think about the future one month ahead—**60%** of Americans think about the very near future—one month from the present—every day. Only **3%** say they rarely or almost never think about it.

The older you get, the less you think about the future—**75%** of seniors rarely or never think 30 years out, while **51%** rarely or never think 10 years out.

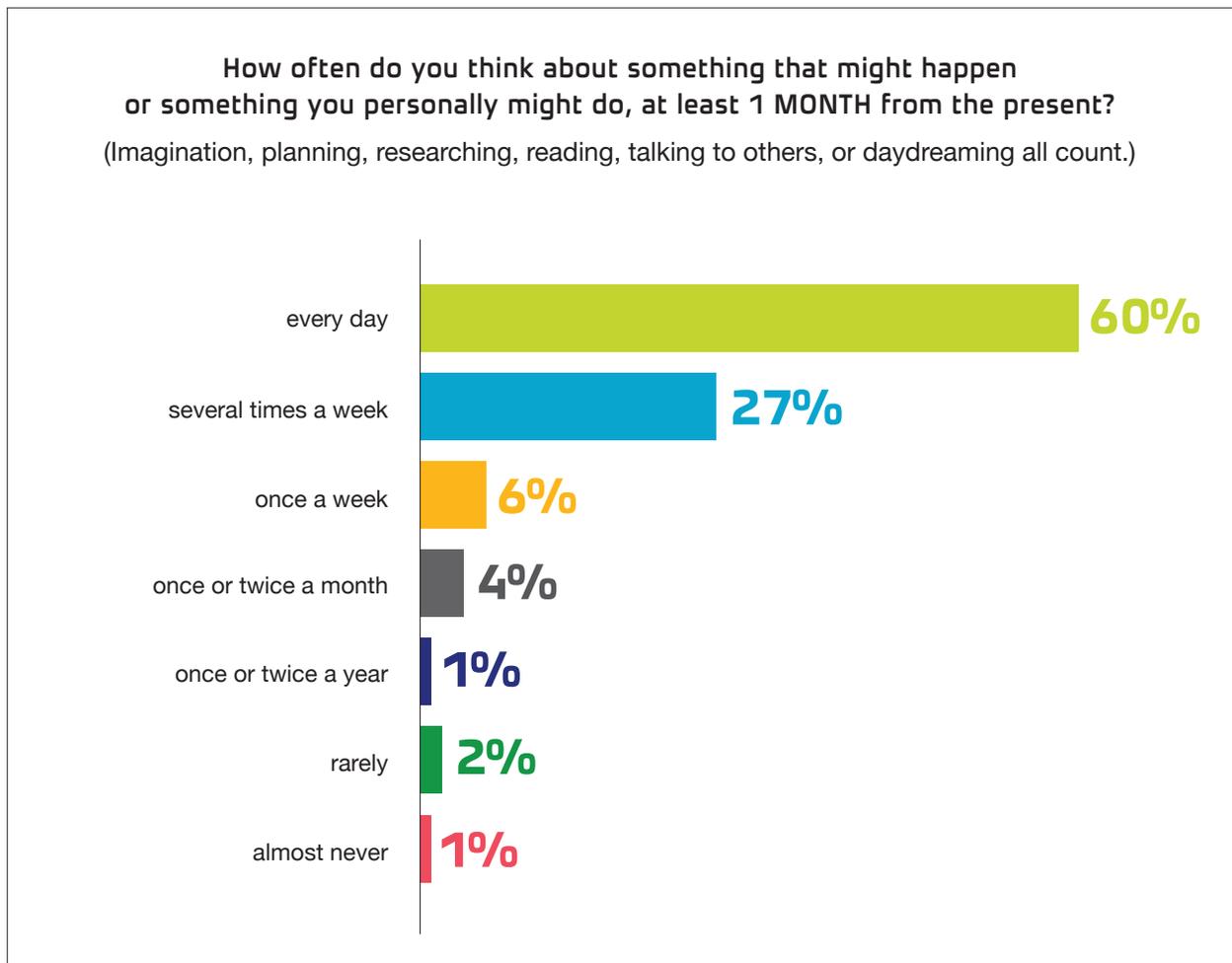
Having children or grandchildren did not significantly increase future thinking, but a brush with mortality—such as a potentially terminal medical diagnosis, a near-death experience, or other traumatic event—did. Among people who reported a brush with mortality, there was a **21%** increase in thinking about the 30-year future often, a **25%** increase in thinking about the 10-year future often, and a **31%** increase in thinking about the five-year future often.

A minority of Americans are highly future-minded: **17%** say they think about the world 30 years out at least once a week; **29%** think about the 10-year future at least once a week, and **35%** think about the 5-year future at least once a week.

Survey Results

Vast majority of Americans think about the very near future often

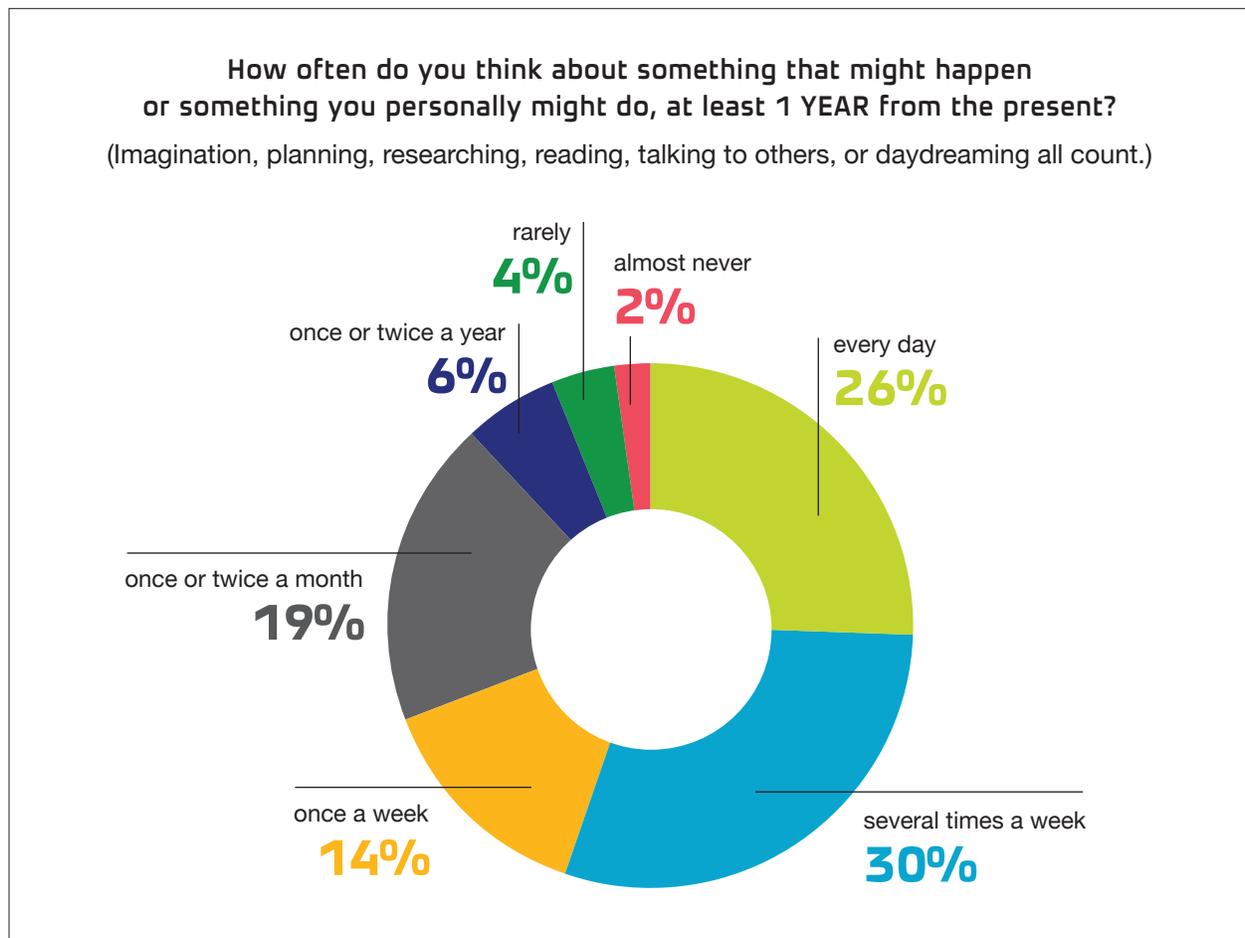
- Nearly 60% of Americans surveyed think about something that might happen, or something they personally might do, at least one month from the present every day.
- 27% think about something that might happen one month from the present several times a week, and 12% think about the very near future once a week or once or twice a month.
- Only 2.8% rarely or almost never think about what might happen one month from the present, and less than 1% think about the future one-month from the present once or twice a year.



Survey Results, cont.

Americans think one year out often, but frequency begins to drop

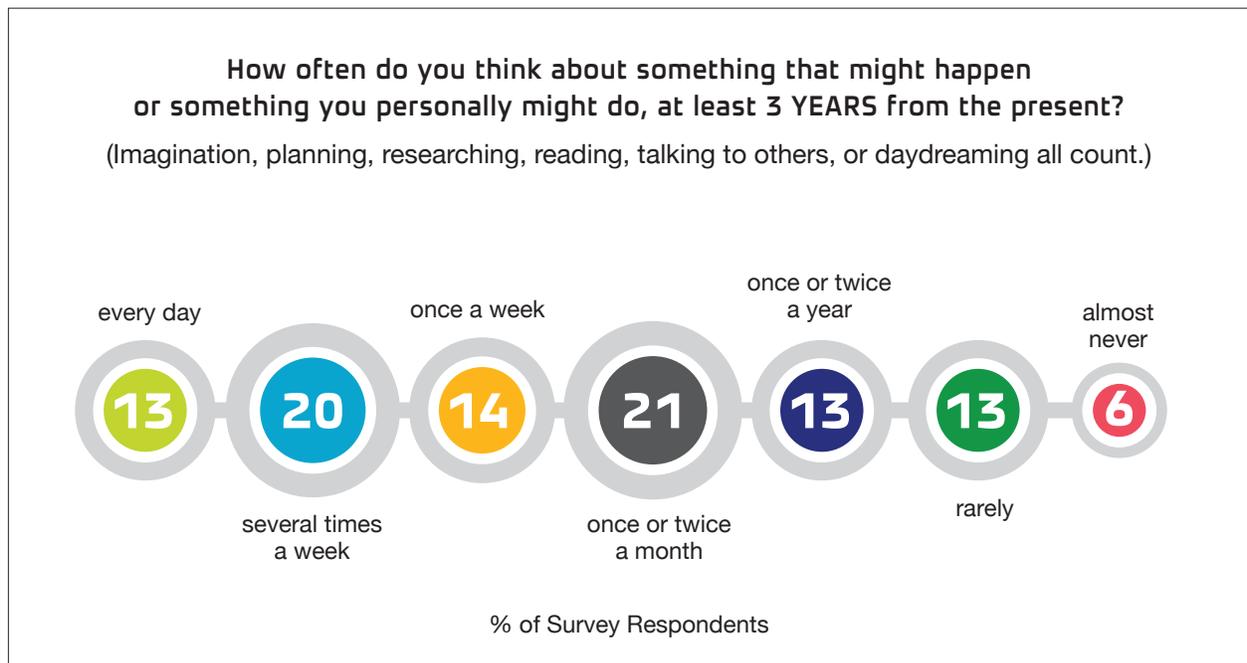
- 26% of Americans surveyed think about something that might happen, or something they personally might do, at least one year from the present every day.
- While more than a quarter of respondents think about the 1-year future every day, it is a significant drop from the 60% of Americans who think about the future one month out every day.
- Another 30% of Americans think about the future 1-year out several times a week.
- Nearly a third think about the 1-year future either once a week (13.5%) or several times a week (18%), while 6% say they rarely or almost never think about the future one year from the present.
- Another 6% say they think about the future one year from the present once or twice a year.



Survey Results, cont.

A third of Americans think three years into the future often

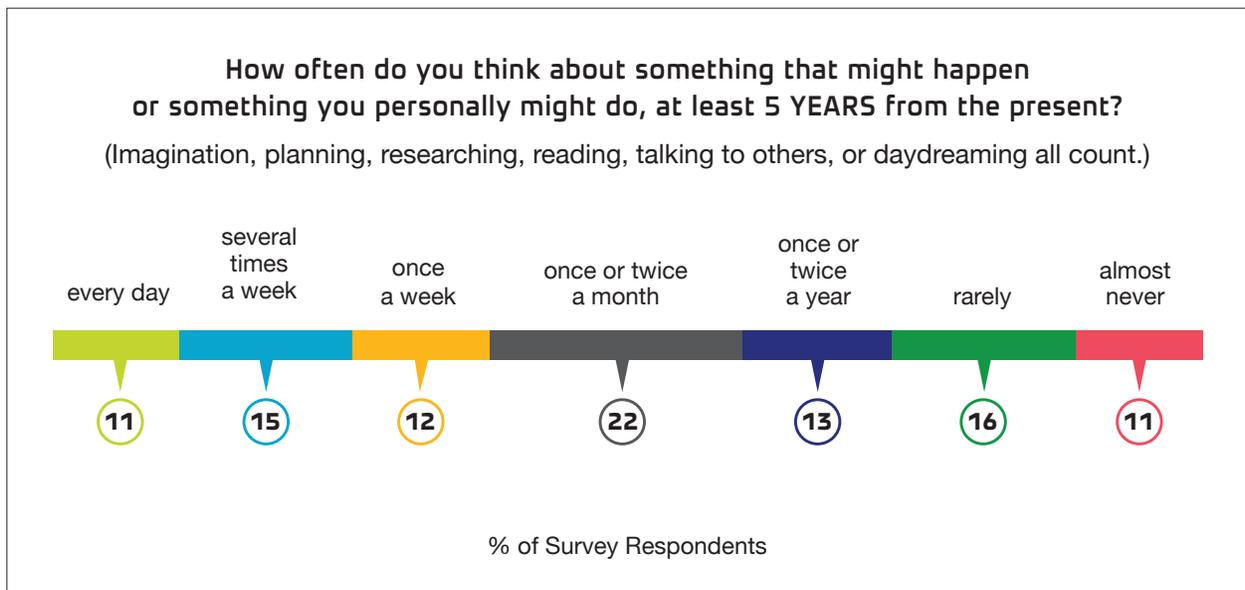
- Combined, 1/3 of Americans surveyed think about something that might happen, or something they personally might do, at least three years from the present every day (13%) or several times a week (20%).
- Another third of respondents think about the 3-year future once a week (13%) or once or twice a month (21%). However, at this point the percentage of respondents who rarely (13%) or almost never (6%) think about the future three years out begins to rise.
- Another 13% think about the 3-year future once or twice a year.



Survey Results, cont.

A quarter of Americans think about the 5-year future often

- 1/4 of Americans think about something that might happen, or something they personally might do, at least five years from the present every day (11%) or several times a week (15%).
- However, nearly the same percentage of Americans rarely (16%) or almost never (11%) think about something that might happen five years into the future.
- The largest percentage of this group (34%) think about the five-year future intermittently, with 12% thinking about the five-year future once a week, and 22% thinking about it once or twice a month.
- 13% think about the 5-year future once or twice a year.



Survey Results, cont.

More than a third of Americans rarely think about the 10-year future

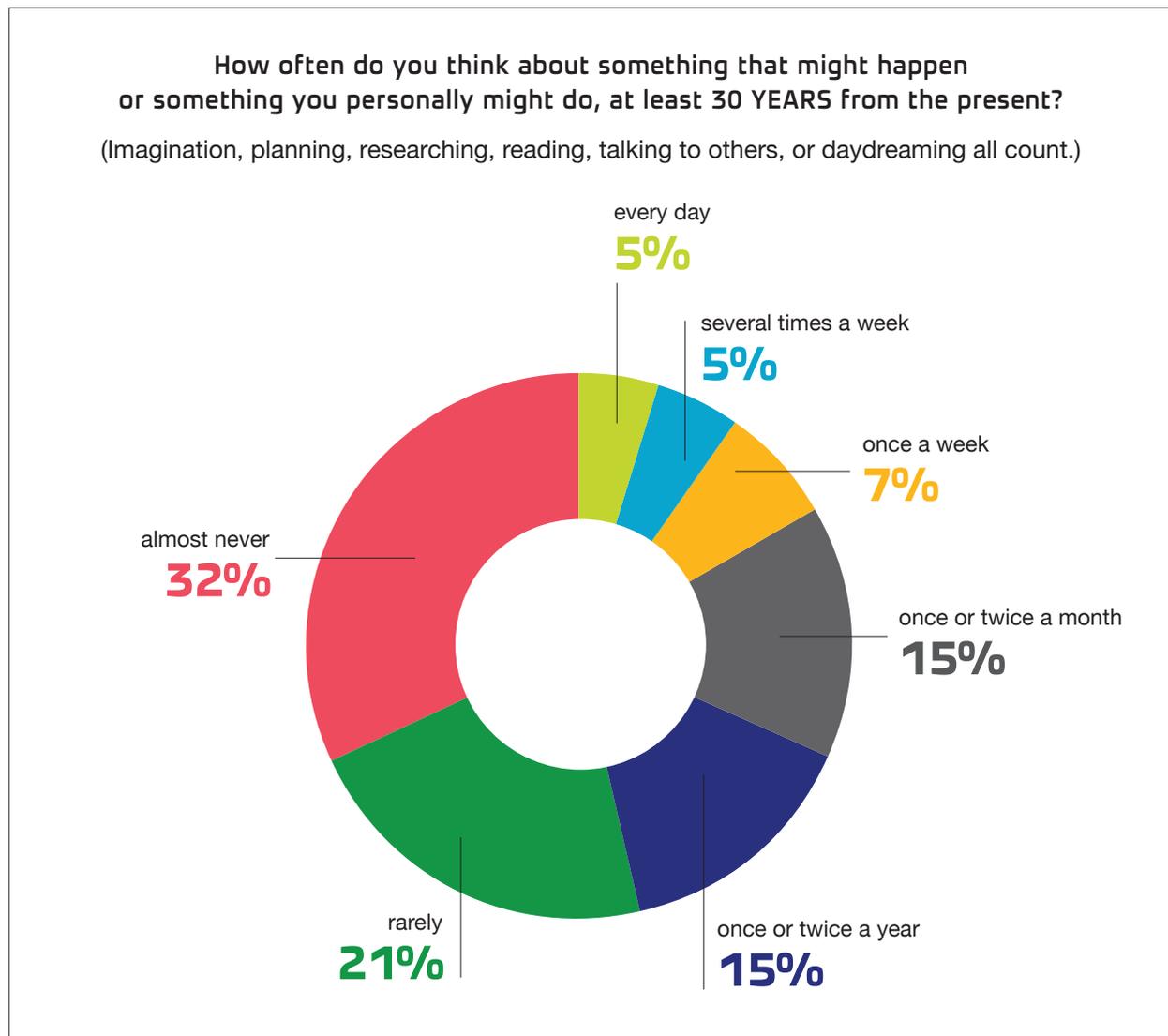
- Twice as many people (37%) do not think about something that might happen at least 10 years from the present than these who think about it every day (8%) or several times a week (10%).
- Nearly 1/3 of Americans think about the 10-year future intermittently, with 12% thinking about something that might happen 10 years in the future once or twice a week, and another 20% thinking about it once or twice a month.
- 15% think 10 years out once or twice a year.



Survey Results, cont.

Majority of Americans rarely think about the far future

- The majority of Americans surveyed (53%) rarely (21%) or almost never (32%) think about something that might happen in the far future, or 30 years from the present.
- Only 10% think about the far future often, with 5% thinking about something 30 years down the road every day and another 5% thinking about it once or twice a week.
- 1 in 3 think about the far future once or twice a month (15%) or once or twice a year (15%).



Factors That Affect Future Thinking

Having children or grandchildren **did not significantly increase future thinking**, but a brush with mortality—such as a potentially terminal medical diagnosis, a near-death experience, or other traumatic event—did.

Among people who reported having children, 31% almost never thought about the 30-year future and 22% said they did rarely. Among those reporting having grandchildren, 54% said they almost never thought about the 30-year future and 21% said they rarely did.

