

Worrying about Your Future: How Anxiety Influences People's Implicit Spatial Conceptions of Time

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According to the Temporal Focus Hypothesis, people's sagittal mental space-time mappings are conditioned by their temporal-focus attention (de la Fuente et al., 2014). Based on this, it can be predicted that, by virtue of their future-oriented thinking, individuals with high anxiety should be more likely to think about time according to the future-in-front mapping than those with low anxiety. Utilizing a combined correlational and experimental approach, we found converging evidence for this prediction. First, participants were asked to complete questionnaires about how they generally feel about anxiety or their dispositional anxiety. Next, to increase comparability with previous research, the time diagram task and the Temporal Focus Scale (TFS) were used to gauge people's mental orientation of sagittal time and temporal-focus attention. The two instruments were adapted from de la Fuente et al. (2014) and Shipp, Edwards and Lambert, respectively. In the time diagram task, participants saw from a bird's eye view a cartoon character's head in the center of the picture between two empty boxes, one in front of the participant and the other at his back. Studies 1 and 2 found that individuals higher in dispositional anxiety and state anxiety, who characteristically worry about the future, were more likely to conceptualize the future as in front of them and the past as behind than individuals lower in dispositional anxiety and state anxiety. Study 3 showed that participants who were induced with anxiety mood tended to map the future on a frontal position, compared to those in the baseline condition. These findings shed further light on the Temporal Focus Hypothesis, which provide the first experimental evidence that emotional experience can influence people's temporal-focus attention in determining their metaphorical sagittal orientation of time.