



Effects of Stress and Relaxation on Time Perception

Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology

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Effects of Stress and Relaxation on Time Perception Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology Changes in time perception during and following experiences of stress and relaxation are commonly reported, but little is known about the direction and nature of any time perception changes. In this experimental study, men and women ages 18 to 79 were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: stress (n = 39) - speech preparation and presentation, relaxation (n = 38) - a progressive muscle relaxation exercise, or control (n = 39) - listening to a biography on tape. Multiple measures of time production, time estimation, perceived rate, and attention to time domains (past, present, and future) were made before and after the experimental phase. Retrospective time estimates were made after the experimental phase. Self report, physiological, and biochemical measures of stress were used to evaluate response to the experimental conditions, and results were consistent with increased stress in the stress condition and increased relaxation in the relaxation condition. Measures of duration judgment were relatively consistent within individuals with larger variance from person to person. Some of the individual variance was associated with gender and age with women having generally larger duration judgment ratios (subjective/objective time) than did men (t(110)=2.91, p<.01) and age was significantly correlated with duration judgment ratio. Time was reported to pass slower than usual during relaxation (t(34) = 5.37, p<.01), but time spent relaxed was remembered as significantly shorter than time spent in the control activity (F(2,108) = 9.88, p < .01). Stress led to increases in subjective to objective time ratio (t(37) = 2.34, p < .05), and time following a period of stress was reported to pass quickly. Attention to the present was related to lower reported distress, whereas attention to the past was positively correlated with self-reported distress. These data imply that changes in time perception may reflect changes in experiences of stress or relaxation. Also, interventions to increase focus of attention on the present may be helpful to reduce distress.



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