

Imagine This: Study Suggests Power of Imagination is More Than Just a Metaphor

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We've heard it before: "Imagine yourself passing the exam or scoring a goal and it will happen." We may roll our eyes and think that's easier said than done, but in a new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychologists Christopher Davoli and Richard Abrams from Washington University suggest that the imagination may be more effective than we think in helping us reach our goals.

A group of students searched visual displays for specific letters (which were scattered among other letters serving as distractors) and identified them as quickly as possible by pressing a button. While performing this task, the students were asked to either imagine themselves holding the display monitor with both hands or with their hands behind their backs (it was emphasized that they were not to assume those poses, but just imagine them).

The results showed that simply imagining a posture may have effects that are similar to actually assuming the pose. The participants spent more time searching the display when they imagined themselves holding the monitor, compared to when they imagined themselves with their hands behind their backs. The researchers suggest that the slower rate of searching indicates a more thorough analysis of items closer to the hands. Previous research has shown that we spend more time looking at items close to our hands (items close to us are usually more important than those further away), but this is the first study suggesting that merely imagining something close to our hands will cause us to pay more attention to it.

The researchers suggest these findings indicate that our "peripersonal space" (the space around our body) can be extended into a space where an imagined posture would take us. They note there may be advantages to having this ability, such as determining if an action is realistic (e.g., "Can I reach the top shelf?") and helping us to avoid collisions. The authors conclude that the present study confirms "an idea that has long been espoused by motivational speakers, sports psychologists, and John Lennon alike: The imagination has the extraordinary capacity to shape reality."