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Fear can alter how we perceive the world, says study

Oct 22, 2012

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Washington: A snake slithering towards you may be farther away than it seems because fear magnifies the sense of danger and it can alter even basic aspects of how we perceive the world around us, says a US study.

“Our results show that emotion and perception are not fully dissociable in the mind,” says study co-author and Emory University psychologist Stella Lourenco.

“Implications for understanding clinical phobias, Lourenco said.

Lourenco conducted the research with Matthew Longo, psychologist at the University of London, the journal Current Biology reports.

People generally have a well-developed sense for when objects heading towards them will make contact, including a split-second cushion for dodging or blocking the object, if necessary. The researchers set up an experiment to test the effect of fear on the accuracy of that skill.

The more fearful someone reported feeling of spiders, the more they underestimated time-to-collision of a looming spider, according to an Emory statement.

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The researchers note that it is unclear whether fear of an object makes the object appear to travel faster, or whether that fear makes the viewer expand their sense of personal space, which is generally about an arm’s length away.

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