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Inhibited Breathing and Suffocation in Relationships: Embodied Cognition in the Context of COVID Masks

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Abstract

According to models of embodied cognition, representations are anchored in bodily experiences; therefore, actual or represented bodily experiences give rise to related psychological representations (Barsalou, 2008). These connections are also expressed in metaphors that are common in the language. We focused on the bodily-based metaphor of “feeling suffocated in a relationship” which may be structured by the experience of inhibited breathing. Accordingly, we examined whether the physical experience of suffocation, stemming from wearing a COVID face mask, leads to the feeling of suffocation in one’s romantic relationship. In an online experiment, participants (N = 180) were randomly assigned to three conditions: wearing a mask properly thereby covering one’s mouth and nose throughout the experiment, wearing a mask on one’s chin, and a no-mask control condition. As expected, only the proper mask condition led to a feeling of suffocation in one’s romantic relationship through the mediation of sensing physical suffocation.