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Loss of control increases belief in precognition and belief in precognition increases control.

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Abstract

Every year thousands of dollars are spent on psychics who claim to "know" the future. The present research questions why, despite no evidence that humans are able to psychically predict the future, do people persist in holding irrational beliefs about precognition? We argue that believing the future is predictable increases one's own perceived ability to exert control over future events. As a result, belief in precognition should be particularly strong when people most desire control—that is, when they lack it. In Experiment 1 (N = 87), people who were experimentally induced to feel low in control reported greater belief in precognition than people who felt high in control. Experiment 2 (N = 53) investigated whether belief in precognition increases perceived control. Consistent with this notion, providing scientific evidence that precognition is possible increased feelings of control relative to providing scientific evidence that precognition was not possible. Experiment 3 (N = 132) revealed that when control is low, believing in precognition helps people to feel in control once more. Prediction therefore acts as a compensatory mechanism in times of low control. The present research provides new insights into the psychological functions of seemingly irrational beliefs, like belief in psychic abilities.