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Attachment representations, patterns of emotion regulation, and social exclusion in patients with chronic and episodic depression and healthy controls

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ABSTRACT

Background
The experience of social exclusion (ostracism) is linked to the etiology and maintenance of depression. Most individuals experience emotional stress in states of social exclusion. Insecurely attached individuals, especially with an unresolved trauma, show maladaptive coping in response to social stress. The present study examines (a) the differences with regards to attachment representations in episodic (ED) and chronic depressive (CD) inpatients and (b) how ostracism affects their emotional reactions.

Methods
Patients with CD (n=29) and ED (n=23) and healthy control subjects (n=29) were interviewed using the Adult Attachment Projective Picture System (AAP), a valid measure to assess attachment representation; and played a virtual ball tossing game simulating social exclusion (Cyberball). Multiple depression-related risk and protective factors were considered. We hypothesized that CD patients show the most severe attachment disorganization and are emotionally most affected by the social exclusion situation. Moreover, we explored the interaction between ostracism and attachment.

Results
Contradicting our hypotheses, ED and CD individuals were almost akin with regards to their attachment insecurity/disorganization and reactions to Cyberball. An emotionally altered reaction to social exclusion was identified in the insecure-disorganized depressive subgroup.

Limitations
Small sample size hampering further subgroup analyses. The ED sample may include single CD subjects with recent manifestation.

Conclusions

1 These authors contributed equally to this work.
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