



Relationships between negative emotionality and attentional control in effortful control

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Abstract

The present study investigated relationships between negative emotionality (i.e., social anxiety, state anxiety, and depression) and attentional control in undergraduate students ($N = 167$) by using the effortful control scale (EC), which consists of the following three subscales: inhibitory control, activation control, and attentional control. Depression was negatively correlated with inhibitory and activation controls when controlling for other negative emotional variables, and social anxiety was negatively correlated with attentional control when controlling for depression and state anxiety. This partial correlation was significant even when controlling for other subscales of effortful control. These results suggest that social anxiety is associated with impaired attentional control, while depression is related to the impairment of inhibitory and activation controls.

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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, several studies have shown that anxious and socially anxious people have directed attention to threatening stimuli (Bögels & Mansell, 2004; Williams, Watts,

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MacLeod, & Mathews, 1988). For example, in the emotional Stroop task, anxious and socially anxious people could not efficiently switch attention from the meaning of the threatening words to the color of the words (Yovel & Mineka, 2005). In addition, socially anxious people become more self-focused in social situations (Spurr & Stopa, 2002); in other words, they had difficulty in attentional shifting from the aspects of the self (e.g., own thoughts, emotions, or appearance) to external stimuli. These attentional biases would be considered to have causal effects on the vulnerability of anxiety (MacLeod, Rutherford, Campbell, Ebsworthy, & Holker, 2002; Mathews & MacLeod, 2002; Woody, 1996; Woody, Chambless, & Glass, 1997). MacLeod et al. (2002) showed that participants who involuntarily attended to the threatening stimuli experienced a more dysphoric mood than the other participants who did not attend to the threatening stimuli (for a review, see Kindt & van den Hout, 2001). Woody (1996) revealed that participants who were told about themselves (e.g., apparent bodily sensations, cognition, and emotions) and who intensified self-focused attention, reported feeling more anxious than the other participants who were not self-focused. These attentional biases may be due to the impairment of effortful control.

Effortful control is defined as “the ability to inhibit a dominant response to perform a sub-dominant response” (Rothbart & Bates, 1998, p. 137). It involves the voluntary control of behaviors and attentional processes and is used to modulate emotional experience and expression (Posner & Rothbart, 2000). The effortful control scale (EC) consists of the following three subscales: inhibitory control, activation control, and attentional control. Inhibitory control refers to the capacity to suppress inappropriate approach behavior. Activation control refers to the capacity to perform an action when there is a strong tendency to avoid it, and attentional control refers to the capacity to focus as well as to shift attention when desired. Attentional control measures the same content as the attentional control scale (ACS; Derryberry & Reed, 2002) and has the same items as the ACS. Effortful control is associated with an attentional switch in the Stroop task, and participants with a high EC score could efficiently complete the Stroop task (Yamagata, Takahashi, Shigemasa, Ono, & Kijima, 2005). Considering selective attention to threatening stimuli in the emotional Stroop task and difficulty in attentional shifting from the self in anxious people, effortful control may be related to anxiety. A previous study showed that effortful control and neuroticism, which is generally considered as an important vulnerability factor of emotional disorders (e.g., anxiety disorders), was negatively correlated (Muris, de Jong, & Engelen, 2004).

Relationships between depression and effortful control have also been indirectly investigated by focusing on internalizing problems or psychopathological symptoms. Internalizing problems in children are linked with depression (Eisenberg et al., 2001), and low effortful control is predictive of internalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Effortful control is also negatively correlated with psychopathological symptoms, which includes symptoms of depression (Muris, 2006).

These results suggest that the impairment of effortful control is related to anxiety and depression. However, previous studies did not reveal whether low effortful control was associated with only anxiety, depression, or both, because indirect measurements include both of them. For example, internalizing problems are associated with not only anxiety but also depression (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Muris (2006) measured psychopathological symptoms related to emotional problems, which includes symptoms of depression and anxiety. In addition, it is necessary to reveal the subscales of effortful control that are associated with anxiety or depression.

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