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Approach and avoidance tendencies in depression and anxiety disorders

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Abstract

Anxiety is linked to increased avoidance and inhibition, whereas depression is linked to decreased approach and diminished behavioral activation. Although these notions are widely recognized, systematic investigation of approach-avoidance tendencies is lacking across these diagnostic groups. Participants (mean age=45.6; 65.8% female) were subdivided in healthy controls (405), remitted patients (877) and currently anxious (217), depressed (154) or comorbid (154) patients. Automatic approach-avoidance tendencies in reaction to facial expression were assessed using the Approach-Avoidance-Task (AAT). Self-reported trait approach and avoidance tendencies were assessed using the BIS/BAS scale. Severity of psychopathology was assessed to examine dose-response relationships. We did not find any consistent associations of automatic approach-avoidance tendencies with psychiatric variables. In contrast, medium to large differences in BIS scores showed increased trait avoidance tendencies in all patient groups relative to healthy controls. Overall, it seems that increased trait avoidance, rather than decreased approach, is a characteristic of affective
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