

“Listen! I am afraid of gaining weight!” A path from anxiety to anorexia nervosa through biased attention.

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Authors

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Aim

This project tests (1) whether anxiety leads to biased attention in anorexia nervosa (AN) and (2) whether biased attentional processes represent a mediating factor between trait anxiety and specific AN symptoms.

Background

Although AN and anxiety disorders share great comorbidity, little interest has been raised for the predictive power of anxiety. Based on an evolutionary perspective, anxiety serves a threat detecting function. Whereas anxiety is functional up to a certain point, strong levels of anxiety bias the processing of information through a disproportionate likelihood of detecting threat. Such biased information processing has a great impact on the subsequent manifestation and strengthening of psychopathological symptoms. It is unknown to what extent anxiety contributes to the etiology of AN through biased attention.

Method

In a mixed design, anorectic patients, depressed patients and a healthy control group will be confronted with an anxiety inducing and no-anxiety inducing math test. The attentional bias will be measured with three different tasks, i.e., a stroop task, a dot probe task and a free viewing task. Besides reaction times, participants' eye gaze will be recorded to assess the underlying time course of ABs. The experiment will be run in a female, adolescent clinical population aged 14-18 years.

Execution

June 2016 – June 2018

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