
Attention Training Toward and Away from Threat in Social Phobia: Effects on Subjective, Behavioral, and Physiological Measures of Anxiety

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Abstract

Social phobics exhibit an attentional bias for threat in probe detection and probe discrimination paradigms. Attention training programs, in which probes always replace non-threatening cues, reduce attentional bias for threat and self-reported social anxiety. However, researchers have seldom included behavioral measures of anxiety reduction (e.g., behavioral approach task, speech performance), and have never taken physiological measures of anxiety reduction. In the present study, we trained individuals with generalized social phobia ($n = 57$) to attend to threat cues (attend-to-threat), to attend to positive cues (attend-to-positive), or to alternately attend to both (control condition). We assessed not only self-reported social anxiety, but also behavioral (i.e., speech performance in front of a video-camera) and physiological measures (i.e., change in skin conductance reactivity to the onset of a slide instructing participants that they would have to give an impromptu 2-min speech in front of video-camera) of social anxiety. Participants trained to attend to nonthreatening cues demonstrated significantly greater reductions in self-reported, behavioral, and physiological measures of anxiety than did participants from the attend-to-threat and control conditions.

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