
THE TEMPORAL EVOLUTION OF THE ATTENTIONAL PATTERN IN HEALTH ANXIETY. AN ANALYSIS OF THE VIGILANCE- AVOIDANCE HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract

Many studies found that anxious subjects adopt a distinct pattern in processing threatening information, attentional biases being invoked both as maintenance and causal factors in anxiety disorders' dynamic (MacLeod & Hagan, 1992; MacLeod et al., 2002). Such a mechanism is not a homogeneous one irrespective of the anxiety form under discussion: Mogg, Mathews & Weinman (1987) suggest that while in the initial stage of information processing, anxious subjects exhibit vigilance for threat, at strategic level they show the tendency to avoid it. As most of the studies have used socially anxious subjects, this research tests the vigilance-avoidance hypothesis on a nonclinical health anxiety (HA) sample. We used a modified Dot Probe task with verbal stimuli presented at four exposure durations (from 50 to 2000 ms). The words were different by relevance for HA and emotionality (anxious vs. neutral), and fit for length and frequency of use in general language. The results indicated that under specified circumstances all the subjects are vigilant for threat, but the bias effect appears earlier and lasts longer in anxious subjects. Up to 1000 ms it enhances linearly with the exposure time and disappears at 2000 ms. No avoidance was found in any exposure condition. The results are interpreted in terms of cognitive control strategies.

Keywords: *attentional biases, health anxiety, cognitive control*

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