Author's response to reviews

Title: Internet-delivered attention training in individuals with social anxiety disorder - a double blind randomized controlled trial

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Dr. Ehring,

First, we are very pleased that you decided to accept your manuscript pending three minor issues. Attached please find an explanation of our responses with the places in the document where the changes have been made indicated. These refer to the version we have submitted with all changes indicated in track changes. We agree that the requested changes have improved the clarity and overall quality of the publication.

We thank you for your assistance with this manuscript and are looking forward to a publication in BMC Psychiatry.

Best regards,

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Minor issue 1

(1) Reviewer 1 (1st comment) asked you to clarify how bias was assessed in your study. In the revised manuscript, you now provide a clear description of this procedure as well as a reference to an earlier study using the same measure. However, I think that you should also take the reviewer’s somewhat critical view on your bias measure into account and critically discuss the advantages and disadvantages. In my opinion, it could be argued that a task, in which the probe sometimes appears in the position of the disgust face and sometimes in the position of the neutral face, would be more accurate.

Response:

We have added the following text:

“The bias measure used in this study can be criticized. It could be argued that a task, in which the probe sometimes appears in the position of the disgust face and sometimes in the position of the neutral face, would be more accurate. However, Koster and coworkers [52] proposed that the probe detection task may be modified such that vigilance for threat and disengagement from threat may be assessed by including baseline trials, i.e., trial with two neutral faces. Using this new measure of bias, Koster et al. found that individuals with anxiety have had difficulty in disengaging their attention from highly threatening pictures. This measure of bias has been used but other investigators to assess the specific components of attentional bias in anxiety [53-55].” (Lines 304-312)

Minor issue 2

(2) Reviewer 3 (1st comment) suggested to expand your introduction, including a description of the link between the large body of basic research into attentional processes in anxiety and CBM with its clinical application. In response to this suggestion, you have added one sentence, which in my opinion does not really capture the essence of the reviewer’s suggestion. You may want to extend this a bit, referring more explicitly to the translational nature of research in this area and the theoretical rationale behind the development of clinical applications of CBM.

Response:

We have added the following text:

“Attentional bias for threat in social anxiety is commonly measured using the probe detection task [6-8]. In the probe detection task [9] (for a review, see 10), participants see a pair of faces at two different spatial locations on a screen. One of the faces is threatening, the other face is neutral. After the offset of these faces, a probe appears replacing the threatening face (congruent presentation) or neutral face stimulus (incongruent presentation). Faster responses to detect probes replacing threat faces than probes replacing neutral faces are used as an index of attentional bias toward threat relevant information.

Moreover, there is evidence that successful treatment for social phobia may lead to a normalization of attention bias for threat [11]. This finding is consistent with the view that attention bias to threat-relevant information plays a role in the maintenance of social phobia. Based on these preliminary findings, MacLeod and colleagues [12] reported the first study to train attention and examine its effect on anxiety. These researchers found that participants in the Attend Threat condition showed faster response latencies for detecting probes following threat words than neutral words. Participants in the Attend Neutral condition showed the opposite pattern of results. Moreover, this training extended to word pairs containing novel threat-relevant words and was not confined to specifically trained word pairs. Finally, participants in the
Attend Threat condition responded more negatively to the experimental stressor than did those in the Attend Neutral condition. Extending this research, investigators have examined the effect of attention training in clinical populations. Recent reviews [4, 5, 13] suggest that attention training can be effective in reducing anxiety in clinical and non-clinical populations.” (Lines 53-74)

Minor issue 3

(3) P. 3, line 60: It may be difficult for readers to understand the information about "128 pairs of faces" as the task has not been introduced at this point in the manuscript.

Response:

We have changed the sentence to the following in order to make it clearer: “The training can sometimes be as short as one session with a total of 128 stimulus pairings [16].” (Lines 83-84)