Reviewer’s report

Title: Attentional bias modification in reducing test anxiety vulnerability: A randomized controlled trial

Version: 2 Date: 06 Jul 2017

Reviewer: Lauren Hallion

Reviewer's report:

General comments

The present study (BPSY-D-0045R2) describes the effects of a five-day course of attention bias modification (ABM) on test anxiety. The article has several strengths, such as the use of different tasks for training versus testing. In light of ongoing debates about possible independent effects of ABM placebo conditions (e.g., Heeren et al., 2015), the inclusion of a wait list control group in addition to the standard experimental and placebo groups is a strength. However, this issue is not addressed in the manuscript. The authors may wish to discuss whether, and to what extent, the present findings inform those debates. At a minimum, the authors' rationale for including a wait list control group should be stated.

The abstract states that the aim of the study is to "modify high test-anxiety individuals' attention." However, the Method does not indicate whether participants were selected on the basis of test anxiety. This is a central issue and should be clarified throughout the manuscript.

The Background section of the abstract focuses heavily on "test anxiety." Consequently, the use of the term "test sections" in the Method section of the abstract ("...20 of whom received no intervention between two test sections") leads the reader to believe that participants completed academic exams during the course of the study. In the body of the article it becomes clear that the term "test" is being used to describe different administrations of the cognitive task (i.e., pre-training and post-training). In light of the focus on test anxiety, the term "test" is confusing when used in this way and should be eliminated throughout the paper (consider replacing with "time point").

Most critically, because a) the training was not in fact administered to coincide with academic exams, b) the training task did not include test-related stimuli, and c) participants do not appear to have been selected based on test anxiety, additional justification is needed for the use of self-reported test anxiety as the sole outcome measure. It appears that the DASS may have been administered at posttest. If this is correct, those results should also be reported.

Extensive editing for word choice, syntax, and style is needed throughout. This is especially critical for the abstract, but applies to the entire manuscript.
More specific comments are as follows:

Introduction

The introduction should be revised to clarify that meta-analyses do not consistently show a positive effect of ABM on symptoms. The relatively poor reliability of the dot-probe task should also be acknowledged.

The introduction is very brief. A more detailed review of the literature would improve the manuscript.

The phrase “anxiety mood” should not be used. Instead, use "anxiety" or "state anxiety."

Method

Please clarify which tasks were administered during the 5-day training period, how often they were completed (e.g., once daily?), and whether any training sessions took place outside the lab.

Please explicitly state that the emotional Stroop is being used in this study as a measure of attentional bias. In the Discussion, I recommend considering possible alternative explanations for eStroop results (e.g., impaired disengagement; differences in autonomic arousal between positive and negative blocks.

All self-report measures administered as part of the study should be listed and described.

Results

Please include effect sizes throughout to facilitate interpretation of the results.

The use of subscripts for VAS and sAA is confusing and should be clarified. The VAS vulnerability to stress results are not interpretable without a clear indication of what each subscript corresponds to.

Discussion

The discussion points about laboratory effects and expressive writing need particular clarification.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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