

Social phobics more affected by scowling faces

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These photographs were shown to people with social anxiety disorder and a mentally healthy control group to test the brain's reaction and ability to deal with disturbing images.

(PhysOrg.com) -- See something disturbing? Maybe it's a scene from the nightly news of someone being beaten in a riot, or a person scowling at you in a crowd.

Whatever the image, chances are you'll get over it pretty quickly by telling yourself you're not in harm's way, that the people being hit will be OK, and that mean-looking person has no reason to be angry with you.

In a study published Feb. 2 in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Stanford psychology researcher Philippe Goldin shows that mentally healthy adults can put their minds at ease by adding to the story behind the image. When test subjects were shown pictures of someone being hurt, for instance, they might say to themselves that the victim received

immediate medical attention.

"We're trying to get at what people might say in their minds to deflect their tendency or habit to react in ways that increase their negative emotion," said Goldin, the study's lead author. "What can we do to make ourselves feel more at peace? How do we reduce the tendency to think, 'This is about me,' when, in fact, it may have nothing to do with me."

But for people with social anxiety disorder (SAD), calming down is more complicated than muttering a mantra.

By using magnetic resonance imaging to compare the brains of psychologically healthy adults to those with SAD, Goldin and his fellow researchers found both groups of test subjects reacted similarly when they saw pictures of violent scenes.

Seeing photos of people being beaten, stabbed or killed activated everyone's amygdala, an area of the brain that deals with emotion.

"Whether or not they felt intense anxiety, their brains were reacting to the violent scenes," Goldin said. "That shows we are all reactive to images of aggression."

When the test subjects gave themselves a personal message of reassurance and safety, the MRI showed they could all easily tap the cognitive regions of their brains needed to relax. They also said they felt more at ease.

But when the participants were shown images of a perceived social threat—such as a photograph of an angry-looking face—their reactions were different. The mentally healthy group was able to dismiss any negative feelings by saying to themselves, "That guy is just having a bad day."

The group with SAD had a harder time shaking it off.

"The brain areas associated with cognitive controls were recruited more intensively by the healthier adults compared to anxiety patients," Goldin said. "Social phobics are more challenged by social threats. They take them much more personally."

And people with SAD typically deal with their condition by staying away from the things that stress them out, like crowds, intimacy or even working in an office. While avoidance may make them feel better, it doesn't help them overcome their disorder, Goldin said.

Goldin is now looking for ways to best help people with SAD overcome the anxiety they deal with on a daily basis. He is organizing clinical trials that offer social phobics cognitive behavioral therapy or stress reduction training that focuses on meditation and exercise as ways to calm down.

"We know that a person with SAD can regulate and calm themselves down when they see a physical threat, where the situation is not about them," Goldin said. "So we need to find a way to help them transfer that skill to deal with things they perceive as social threats."

Provided by Stanford University

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