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Chapter 44

Theoretical relevance of attentional bias, and starting point for treatment: The case of body dissatisfaction

Nienke C. Jonker and Peter J. de Jong

Overview

Selective visual processing of disorder-relevant information (i.e., attentional bias) has been proposed to be a core characteristic of many psychiatric disorders. It has been shown to be involved in addiction, depression, eating disorders, and anxiety. For example, substance dependent individuals have been found to show an attentional bias for substance cues and people with post-traumatic stress disorder for trauma reminders. Current views suggest that it might be relevant to conceptualise psychopathology in terms of dysfunctional transdiagnostic processes instead of assuming a latent pathogenic factor. This sparked research expanding the traditional focus on disorder-specific biases to also cover biased attentional processing involved in dysfunctional transdiagnostic processes such as perfectionism, rumination, and body-dissatisfaction. In this chapter we will highlight some of the findings related to body-dissatisfaction that emerged from

this transdiagnostic approach, discuss the potential clinical implications, and provide some directions for future research.

Major Findings

Body dissatisfaction is associated with rumination, emotional distress and depression, and it is considered a key factor in the development, maintenance and relapse of eating disorders. Selective attention towards ‘ugly’ versus ‘beautiful’ body parts may well contribute to people’s body dissatisfaction. As a first step to test the role of attentional bias in body dissatisfaction, eye movements of women with and women without body dissatisfaction were tracked, when they were looking at images of their body. Importantly, results indicated that specifically women who were dissatisfied with their body showed an attentional preference for body parts that they rated as relatively ‘ugly’. As a second step the causal relation between such an attentional bias for ‘ugly’ body parts and body dissatisfaction needs to be examined. One way to test the proposed causal influence is to manipulate people’s attentional bias and examine the effect on body dissatisfaction. An experimental study indeed showed that women who were trained to attend to their self-defined ugly body parts, showed a significant increase in body dissatisfaction. This shows that an attentional bias for ugly body parts can indeed play a role in the development of body dissatisfaction.

Clinical Implications

The findings indicating that an attentional bias for ugly body parts is indeed involved in body dissatisfaction, together with research showing that inducing an attentional bias to ugly body parts increased women’s dissatisfaction with their body, provide an important starting point for potential treatments. As such, mirror exposure has been proposed as an interven-

tion for body dissatisfaction since it directly targets the way individuals look at their body. Recent work testing the efficacy of mirror exposure indeed showed that this treatment was very effective in improving participants' body satisfaction. However, in spite of its efficacy to improve body satisfaction, mirror exposure was not successful in systematically changing participants' viewing pattern. Therefore, complementary interventions that are successful in modifying participants' viewing pattern might provide additional benefit to individuals who are dissatisfied with their body. One class of interventions that has been designed to directly target individuals' attention is attention bias modification (ABM) training. Recent research using ABM as a means to train individuals to selectively attend to their own beautiful body parts showed that such ABM intervention can indeed successfully increase people's body satisfaction. Since training individuals to selectively attend to their ugly body parts was found to decrease their body satisfaction, the efficacy of ABM might be further enhanced by not only training to direct attention towards 'beautiful' body parts but also to train people to disengage attention from ugly body parts.

Future Directions

It would be important for future research to test whether indeed combining ABM with mirror exposure has added value in increasing body satisfaction and reducing eating disorder symptomatology. In addition, it would be relevant to test the role of attentional bias to cues related to other transdiagnostic processes such as rumination and perfectionism, or general traits such as reward and punishment sensitivity, and to explore whether modification of these attentional biases has clinical value.

Further Readings

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