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Sascha Struijs, Femke Lamers, Maartje Vroling,
Karin Roelofs, Philip Spinhoven, Brenda W.J.H.
Penninx



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Approach and avoidance tendencies in depression and anxiety disorders

Sascha Struijs^{a*}, dr. Femke Lamers^a, dr. Maartje Vroling^b, prof.dr. Karin Roelofs^c,
prof.dr. Philip Spinhoven^d, prof.dr. Brenda W. J. H. Penninx^a

^aDepartment of Psychiatry and EMGO Institute for Health and Care Research, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, PO Box 74077, 1070 BB Amsterdam, the Netherlands

^bAmarum, expert center for eating disorders (GGNet), PO Box 2003, 7230 GC Warnsveld, the Netherlands;
Department of Clinical Psychology, Radboud University Nijmegen, 6525 HR Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^cBehavioral Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, 6525 HR Nijmegen, The Netherlands

^dInstitute of Psychology, Leiden University, 2333 AK Leiden, the Netherlands; Department of Psychiatry, Leiden University Medical Centre, 2333 ZA, the Netherlands

*Correspondence to: Department of Psychiatry and EMGO Institute for Health and Care Research, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, PO Box 74077, 1070 BB Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Tel.: (+31) 020-7884521. s.struijs@ggzingeest.nl

Abstract

Anxiety is linked to increased avoidance and inhibition, whereas depression is linked to decreased approach and diminished behavioral activation. Although these notions are widely recognized, systematic investigation of approach-avoidance tendencies is lacking across these diagnostic groups. Participants (mean age=45.6; 65.8% female) were subdivided in healthy controls (405), remitted patients (877) and currently anxious (217), depressed (154) or comorbid (154) patients. Automatic approach-avoidance tendencies in reaction to facial expression were assessed using the Approach-Avoidance-Task (AAT). Self-reported trait approach and avoidance tendencies were assessed using the BIS/BAS scale. Severity of psychopathology was assessed to examine dose-response relationships. We did not find any consistent associations of automatic approach-avoidance tendencies with psychiatric variables. In contrast, medium to large differences in BIS scores showed increased trait avoidance tendencies in all patient groups relative to healthy controls. Overall, it seems that increased trait avoidance, rather than decreased approach, is a characteristic of affective

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