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Distressing visual mental images in depressed patients and healthy controls – are they one and the same?

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Abstract

Negative mental images are common in a range of mental disorders. So far, only inconclusive evidence has been obtained for depression specificity. We assessed the disparities and similarities of a variety of imagery characteristics in 17 patients suffering from depressive disorders and 17 healthy matched controls who all reported negative mental images. The number of intrusive images, their frequency, and the associated distress were significantly greater for the depressed individuals. Compared with non-depressed controls, negative images during depression were more frequently triggered by internal factors and led to depression-related emotions. Approximately 30 percent of the images in the depressed group did not consist of actual memories of real-life events. No significant differences in vividness or perceived controllability were observed, but the depressed patients experienced significantly more bodily symptoms during the intrusions than the healthy controls. The results indicate that the central characteristics of the negative mental images of depressed and non-depressed individuals are distinguishable, despite some similarities, and may contribute to depressive symptoms.

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