

Listen I'm afraid of gaining weight! The Path from Anxiety to anorexia Nervosa through biased Attention - The PANDA-Study

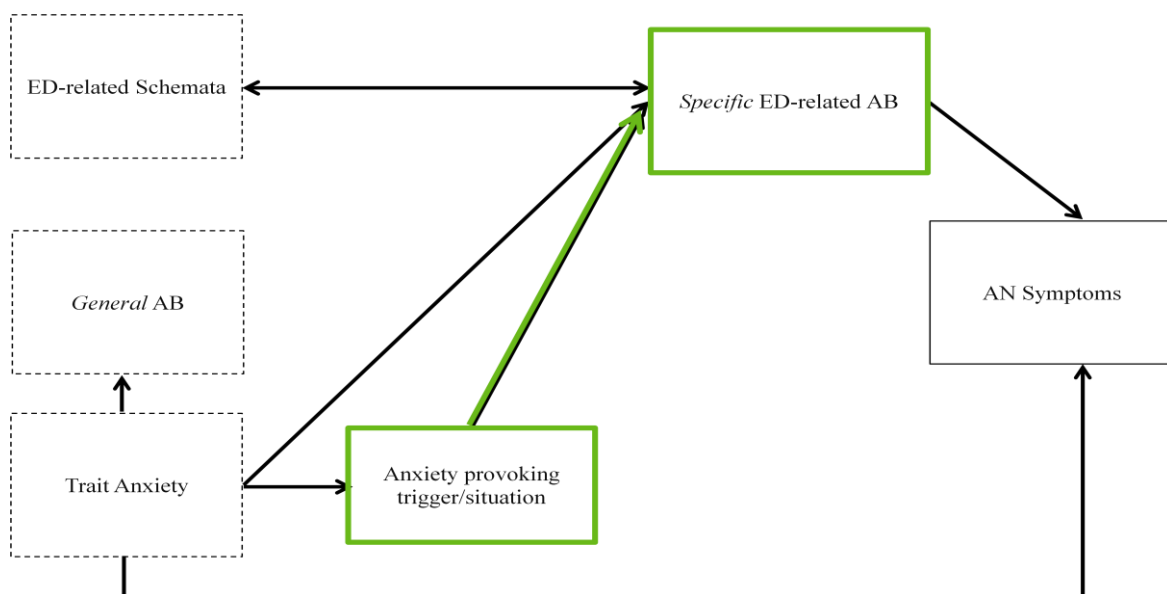
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Authors

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Introduction: Up to 75% of patients with an eating disorder suffer from a comorbid anxiety disorder. Permanent elevated levels of anxiety bias the initial processing of information towards a disproportionate likelihood of detecting threat. This has been defined as attentional bias (AB). Processing information in a biased negative way has a great impact on the subsequent manifestation and strengthening of psychopathological symptoms. In particular under stressful situations, such biases have been found.

Objective: The present study strived to assess whether high levels of anxiety elicit a *specific* body-related AB in anorectic patients compared to a depressed and a healthy control group. Secondly, we investigated whether biased attentional processes act as a mediating factor between trait anxiety and the degree of symptoms in AN.



Methods: To answer the research questions, 108 participants were included into the present study. Of those, thirteen participants had to be excluded as they did not meet our inclusion criteria, were released from inpatient treatment or were lost due to technical problems. Thirty-four clinically diagnosed female patients with a diagnosed anorexia nervosa (n=34) were recruited at two different inpatient clinics in Hamm and Munich. In addition, a healthy control group (n = 30) and a depressed clinical control group (n=31) were recruited in Hamm. All participants completed a range of questionnaires and took part in two experimental sessions (Stroop task, dot probe task, free viewing task) following an anxiety induction (version A) or

a neutral performance task (version B). Version A and B are offered following a counterbalancing schema.

Results: Based on data of our visual analogue scales, our anxiety induction worked very well. All three groups showed a significant increase in experienced anxiety and stress levels following the manipulation. At the same time, stress levels were not too high and participants did not withdraw from the study due to the body pictures, which are depicted in our low drop-out rates.

First results based on our dot probe data reveal a significant attentional bias for underweight body stimuli in the group with anorexia nervosa. However, no significant three-way-interaction between Group x StimuliType x Manipulation was found, which shows that the manipulation did not amplify the attentional bias following the anxiety induction.

Conclusions & outlook: One explanation for the missing three-way interaction between Group x StimuliType x Manipulation could be a ceiling effect when looking at the visual analogue scales and the strength of the attentional bias following the neutral performance task. Subsequent analyses will investigate the mediating effect of the attentional bias on the relationship between anxiety and eating disorder psychopathology.

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