

THE COMPLEX INTERPLAY BETWEEN AFFECT AND ATTENTION IN DYSPHORIA: A STARTLE REFLEX MODULATION AND CARDIAC DECELERATION STUDY

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Depression is characterized by dysregulated affective disposition and by biased attentional processing of emotional information. However, very little is known about the relation between these processes. The present study used attentional and affective startle modulation and cardiac deceleration to investigate the interplay between affective disposition and attention during the viewing of emotional pictures in individuals with dysphoria ($n = 38$) and in controls ($n = 52$). The attentional and affective modulation of the startle reflex were investigated through the presentation of a startle probe at 300, 1500, 3500, and 4500 ms after picture onset. To analyze later stages of attention processing, heart rate deceleration was also assessed during 6 s of picture viewing. Whereas controls showed the expected startle potentiation to unpleasant stimuli as compared to neutral and pleasant ones, individuals with dysphoria did not show any startle potentiation in response to unpleasant stimuli. Of note, individuals with dysphoria showed blunted startle potentiation to unpleasant stimuli as compared to controls. Moreover, the two groups did not differ with respect to attentional startle modulation. However, individuals with dysphoria showed a prolonged cardiac deceleration when viewing unpleasant compared to neutral stimuli, whereas the same effect was observed in controls only in the initial stage of picture processing. This study suggests that dysphoria is characterized by underactivation of the defensive motivational system and by prolonged attentional allocation to unpleasant stimuli.

Descriptors: Dysphoria, Affect, Attention