

Uncertainty can be more stressful than clear negative feedback

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Some individuals would rather receive clear negative information than deal with ambiguity or uncertainty, according to new research out of the University of Toronto.

In a new study published in *Psychological Science*, U of T researchers examined whether people reacted more strongly to negative or to uncertain feedback. Participants' brain activity was measured as they completed a series of tasks and were given clear positive, clear negative or ambiguous feedback.

Study authors Jacob Hirsh and Michael Inzlicht looked at the response of the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a brain area associated with error-monitoring and conflict-related anxiety. They found that individuals with high levels of neuroticism, a personality trait related to negative emotion and anxiety, showed stronger responses in this brain region when they were given uncertain feedback, compared to when they were given unambiguous negative feedback.

"Uncertainty can be very stressful," says Hirsh, a PhD student and lead author on the paper. "What this study shows is that neurotic individuals are actually more comfortable with clear negative information than they are with uncertainty – even when the outcome of that uncertainty could be positive. In other words, people who are high in neuroticism appear to prefer the devil they know over the devil they don't know."

Source: University of Toronto

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