

Researchers use computer-based treatment for children with anxiety

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(Medical Xpress)—When traditional methods of treatment do not work for children suffering from anxiety disorders, researchers at FIU believe they have found another option.

As many as 50 percent of patients with [separation anxiety](#), social phobia and other [anxiety disorders](#), do not respond fully to cognitive behavioral therapy, a method that gradually exposes [children](#) to feared objects or events. Families are left discouraged. Ph.D. student Michele Bechor and Psychology Professor Jeremy Pettit decided to try attention bias modification treatment for these children, a computer-based method that seems more like a video game to kids than therapy. The computers help train the children to direct their attention away from threatening stimuli toward non-threatening stimuli.

"I think the treatment format is easier for young children to grasp, and it embraces the technology they are surrounded by today," Bechor said.

The study, published in Journal of Anxiety Disorders, focused on children who completed eight sessions of attention bias modification after traditional [cognitive behavior therapy](#) failed. The results found child self-ratings on [anxiety symptoms](#) and depression symptoms significantly decreased from pretreatment to post-treatment, as did parent ratings on child anxiety-related impairment. The significant reduction in child self-ratings of depressive systems also suggests the effects of attention bias modification treatment may help with other types of emotional distress.

"Currently, there's nothing in the literature to guide us in how to help those children who do not respond well to [cognitive behavioral therapy](#)," Pettit said. "This study represents the first effort to collect empirical data on what to do to help them."

Anxiety disorders occur in as many as 20 percent of children and adolescents. These disorders pose a financial burden on the health care system and are associated with substantial impairment including interference with school attendance, coursework, extracurricular activities and peer relationships.

Pettit and the FIU researchers are expanding upon the research by examining the effectiveness of attention bias modification treatment among children and adolescents who have sub-threshold anxiety, or anxiety that is not severe enough to meet diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder.

More information: Michele Bechor, Jeremy W. Pettit, Wendy K. Silverman, Yair Bar-Haim, Rany Abend, Daniel S. Pine, Michael W. Vasey, James Jaccard, Attention Bias "Modification Treatment for children with anxiety disorders who do not respond to cognitive behavioral therapy: a case series," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, Volume 28, Issue 2, March 2014, Pages 154-159, ISSN 0887-6185, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2013.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2013.09.001).

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