

Anxiety and insecurity may lead to headaches

December 2 2014, by Pepita Smyth



(Medical Xpress)—A new study has suggested that a person's level of emotional security may be linked to their chance of suffering from headaches.

Murdoch DPsych student Juanita KM Berry investigated this idea as part of her research into establishing the psychological and physiological causes for [headache](#). She was particularly interested in headache related to stress.

"We understand that stress causes headache but the mechanisms have not yet been isolated," Ms Berry said.

"I am interested in exploring the interaction between body and mind when experiencing types of pain. Pain is a sensory and emotional

experience and there is capacity for it to be intensified or inhibited by emotions."

Ms Berry established the [emotional attachment](#) styles of nearly 100 adults and categorised them into secure or insecure styles of emotional attachment.

"There are two types of insecure emotional attachment – those with anxious attachment styles seek reassurance from close relationships whereas those with avoidant attachment styles do not turn to others for support," she said.

"We found that this anxious insecure attachment style was a good predictor of headache and that these people recorded a greater intensity of headache.

"Interestingly we found that these subjects seemed to turn to the experimenter for reassurance and reported headaches even before the stressful task began."

Ms Berry and her supervisor Professor Peter Drummond have a number of theories about this connection between anxiety and headache.

"We know that [anxious people](#) get affected by their expectations of success and they can set the bar too high then experience disappointment and stress," Ms Berry said.

"We do not know whether pain is more of a concern to people with anxious attachment or perhaps anticipatory anxiety can make insecurely attached people experience more pain.

"Complaining about pain may even be a way that this group can gain reassurance from others."

Ms Berry said it was important to uncover the answers to these potential mechanisms so that clinicians can help people to get back on their feet sooner.

"This study suggests that anxious insecure attachment styles can impact on the patient-physician relationship, and that GPs and other medical professionals need to be aware of ways to appropriately reassure headache sufferers.

"We also see that partners and primary carers of people with anxious insecure attachment will have a significant part to play in helping them to heal."

Provided by Murdoch University

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