

Improved ability to control attention could lead to reduced worry

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The report, published today in journal *Clinical Psychological Science*, reports on results of two studies involving people with a high tendency to worry.

Professor Elaine Fox, from Oxford's Department of Experimental Psychology said: 'In the first study, we conditioned high and low worriers to fear an angry face. They were then asked to complete a task that required them to concentrate, with the face appearing as a

distraction. We found that high worriers found this much more difficult – that is, they were more easily distracted compared to low worriers.

'We then assessed how well each person could suppress worries. After a period of preparation where they discussed what was worrying them most, they sat for five minutes trying not to think about that topic. High worriers had intrusive thoughts about their worry topic more often than low worriers. The key finding was that those who found it more difficult to concentrate also had more problems controlling their worrying thoughts.'

In the second study, a different group of high worriers went through the same stages as in the first, but they also had a series of five training sessions over three days. Half the participants received sham cognitive training while half received active cognitive training designed to improve their attentional control – ability to deal with distraction.

After the [training sessions](#) they were retested on both the original concentration task and their ability to control worry.

Dr Alan Yates, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at University Campus Oldham (UCO), said: 'When we then asked the participants to sit and not think about their worry topic, we found that those who had received active [cognitive training](#) were slightly more likely to have fewer intrusive worry thoughts than before. We saw no change in the sham training group.'

The team say that their results are a confirmation of earlier reports of a link between attentional control (the ability to concentrate) and the ability to suppress repetitive negative thoughts. The tests also indicate that it could be possible to improve people's ability to control negative thoughts by training them to increase their ability to concentrate.

Professor Fox said: 'These tests were on relatively small groups and a lot more research is needed to work out the best training design for effective treatment. In the end, attentional control [training](#) is likely to be effective when used alongside other support and treatment.'

Provided by Oxford University

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