

Attention bias modification treatment in depressed adolescents

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A study to be published in the March 2016 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (JAACAP) reports that adolescents with major depression who performed a computer-based task designed to shift attention from sad to neutral to positive word associations showed reductions in negative attention biases and clinician-rated depressive symptoms.

11% of American adolescents suffer from Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). Facing a broad range of psychosocial and health problems, these youths are five times more at risk to attempt suicide than peers without psychiatric illness. A novel computer-based task, attention bias modification (ABM), designed to shift attention away from negative stimuli, was found to reduce [depressive symptoms](#) in adults.

A group of researchers led by Dr. Wenhui Yang of Hunan Normal University, examined the short- and long-term effects of ABM tasks in 45 adolescents with MDD, selected from a school population (n=2731). The authors hypothesized that adolescents who engaged in active ABM training would report greater reductions in depressive symptoms compared with adolescents in the control group, who did a placebo training.

Adolescents in the active ABM group completed eight sessions (22 minutes each) over a period of two weeks to shift their attention from sad to neutral words. Nine weeks later, they completed four more sessions (30 minutes each) to shift their attention from neutral to

positive words, again spread over two weeks. The placebo training had the same tasks, but shifted attention towards neutral and sad words equally often.

The researchers found greater reductions in [attention](#) bias score and clinician-rated depressive symptoms for the active ABM group compared with the placebo after the initial two-week training. Moreover, a higher number of participants in active ABM group no longer met diagnostic criteria for MDD compared to participants in the placebo group. After 12 months, the participants in the active ABM group reported even greater reductions in self-reported depressive and anxious feelings.

Based on these findings, the authors concluded that ABM may be a potential treatment tool for mild to moderate adolescent [major depression](#). As most adult depression begins during adolescence, training for [adolescents](#) with depression may have far-reaching effects across their entire life.

More information: Wenhui Yang et al. Attention Bias Modification Treatment for Adolescents With Major Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2015.12.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.12.005)

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