

The transmission of fear between individuals can be counteracted

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

The social transmission of fear, which can cause the development of phobias, can be prevented, according to a new study from Karolinska Institutet. The study, which is published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, deepens our understanding of how best to develop practical strategies for preventing phobias and similar conditions in particularly vulnerable groups.

Throughout its evolution, mankind has benefited from the ability to learn about emotionally charged situations by observing how other individuals behave. The phenomenon is called social learning and can be an efficient means for individuals to avoid danger. Babies, for example, can learn appropriate behaviour by observing what adults do.

There is, however, a flipside to this. This kind of indirect experience can contribute to the transmission of fears and anxiety disorders between members of a family and people living in close proximity. Even though more is now understood about the mechanisms of social transmission for fear, researchers still know surprisingly little about the learning processes that counteract or reduce the transmission of fears between individuals.

Transmission of fear

In the present study, researchers at Karolinska Institutet found that the social transmission of fear can be counteracted. They had participants watch a video in which a "demonstrator" looked at images of two angry human faces. When one of the faces was shown, the demonstrator received an unpleasant electric shock to the wrist. In most cases, there was a transmission of fear from the demonstrator to the participants, who started to manifest fear reactions to the photograph that was associated with danger for the demonstrator.

Safe situation

The researchers then looked at what happened if the participants first saw a film of the demonstrator calmly looking at the same photographs, conveying that the situation was safe and the faces harmless, and found that it prevented the transmission of fear. However, if the participants were first shown a film of the same photographs but without the

presence of the calming demonstrator, this effect was not achieved.

"We found that an earlier safe experience in the presence of another person counteracted the social transmission of fear," says co-researcher Armita Golkar at Karolinska Institutet's Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Division of Psychology.

In further experiments, the researchers observed that the effect remained when the circumstances changed, such as if the demonstrator was no longer present in a subsequent situation. In another version of the experiment, the "safe" and the "dangerous" demonstrators were different people, which cancelled the effect of safety learning.

"This study extends our understanding of the basic learning processes governing [social transmission](#) of [fear](#) and safety, and connects these lines of work to clinical research by examining how prior safe experiences can reduce the transmission of fears between individuals," says the other co-researcher Andreas Olsson from the same department.

More information: Armita Golkar et al. Immunization Against Social Fear Learning., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2016).
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