

Boosting natural brain opioids may be a better way to treat anxiety

March 23 2017



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Boosting natural brain opioids may be a better way to treat disabling emotions, says new research revealing their role in regulating critical brain circuits affecting fear and anxiety.

Published in *Nature Communications* by University of Sydney scholars, the findings suggest medications that boost the effect of natural brain opioids might be a better way to reduce anxiety than 'receptor-binding' [opioid](#) drugs like morphine, which have major side effects.

Fear and anxiety help defend us against harm, and are largely controlled via [neural circuits](#) of interconnected nerve cells and [synaptic activity](#) in the brain's amygdala that allow neurons to pass electrical or chemical signals to each other.

Specialised neural [circuits](#) control these emotions, but disturbances in the circuits can cause prolonged and disabling [emotional responses](#) that are out of proportion to threatening events.

These disturbances are thought to underlie many [anxiety disorders](#) such as phobias and post-traumatic stress disorder, which affect up to a million Australians each year.

Anxiety disorders affect 14 per cent of Australians but are poorly managed by commonly prescribed medications such as [benzodiazepines](#) and [5HT-reuptake inhibitors](#).

"These drugs weren't developed to treat anxiety but they're widely used because of chance findings suggesting their clinical usefulness," says the University of Sydney's Associate Professor Elena Bagley, who led the research.

"Many experts agree that better anxiety treatments will come when science uncovers how the neural circuits and endogenous or [naturally occurring opioids](#) regulate fear and anxiety.

"The precise action of these natural opioids in the brain is poorly understood, but better insights are critical because these opioids control

how we acquire and store fear memories and regulate our emotional responses once a threat has passed."

Experiments in mice have shown that 'deleting' the natural opioid enkephalin, which is heavily expressed in the brain's amygdala, increases their fear, anxiety and aggressiveness. By contrast, increasing enkephalin or reducing its breakdown reduces these behaviours.

While this effect of enkephalin suggests that it is anxiety-inhibiting, when it binds to different receptors in the amygdala, it exerts opposing effects, depending on which one it binds to.

For example, when it binds to the [mu-opioid receptor](#), enkephalin promotes [anxiety](#), but when it binds to the [delta-opioid receptor](#), it inhibits it.

"Given this complexity, understanding the cellular actions of natural opioids at these two receptors is critical if we hope to use opioid-related medications for emotional issues," says Dr Bagley.

"Our findings show that opioids produced and released by our own brain cells strongly regulate these critical [neural circuits](#) that are important for [fear](#) responses.

"We also show that we could boost the actions of these [endogenous opioids](#) using a novel pharmacological approach."

More information: Bryony L. Winters et al, Endogenous opioids regulate moment-to-moment neuronal communication and excitability, *Nature Communications* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/ncomms14611](https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms14611)

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Boosting natural brain opioids may be a better way to treat anxiety (2017, March 23) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-boosting-natural-brain-opioids-anxiety.html>

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