

Memory and Anxiety

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Have you ever been put on the spot to remember a person's name or the name of a TV show? When put in the spotlight and made anxious, you may find it harder to retrieve desired information. Vasa et al (2007) discovered that children with anxiety disorders had lower scores on memory tasks; specifically, children with social phobia (SP) showed lower visual memory, while verbal memory showed no difference between children with and without an anxiety disorder. Vasa cited several studies which found dysfunction of the medial temporal lobe (MTL) in those with anxiety disorder, one of which was Pine et al (1999) who found a link between memory deficit and predicting anxiety disorders. The medial temporal lobe (MTL) and hippocampus involved in memory have been shown to have less function in those with social phobias and depression (Sternberg, 2009; Vasa et al., 2007). This dysfunction may play a role in the disorders and in the memory processes, which may influence each other; lower function of the MTL may result in a disorder, or the disorder is associated with the dysfunction of the MTL. The memory deficit could be due to two ideas: dysfunction within the brain circuits in memory processing, or biased attention processing. Memory in anxiety disorder may be influenced by an attention shift during encoding, as well as the difficulty suppressing threatening information, resulting in less attention for nonthreatening and emotional stimuli. (Vasa et al., 2007)

Sutin and Gillath (2009) found that an anxious person's memories of important relationships are filled with negative emotions; the accessibility of the negativity of the memory was associated with increased distress. They found that the form of distress was also related to the coherence and emotional intensity of the memory. Coherent and emotional intensity of the memory assisted with the association of attachment avoidance and depressive symptoms; intense negative emotion was associated with attachment anxiety and depressive symptoms. They also found that those with avoidance issues typically do not have complete memories through either selective encoding or retrieval, while the negative emotional content still remained. Sutin and Gillath discussed the incoherent memory may be a form of short-term self preservation, yet in the long term it is damaging by the inability to utilize the memory for understanding and self improvement for improving relations. They continued to discuss that those with coherent memories of strategies that worked can be drawn on for future events. Once the script of experiences is developed, then future interactions are then encoded and retrieved through this experiential lens - positive or negative. Those who are unable to retrieve good memories, while retrieving mostly negative emotional memories remain distressed and unable to utilize the good memories for a soothing effect (Sutin & Gillath, 2009). In this study, other studies were cited which found those who can coherently retrieve both positive and negative memories with understanding their meaning have higher adjustment (Blagov & Singer as cited in Sutin & Gillath); this translates into their parenting skills as well (Slade & Cohen as cited in Sutin & Gillath). Children who reminisce about memories and their feelings of the event have increased self-esteem (Bohanek, Fivush, Zaman, Lepore, Merchant, and Duke, 2009).

References

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