



Adult ABMT protocols need adapting for effective use in children

By Dr Jessica K Edwards

Attention bias modification treatment (ABMT) aims to target attention biases in threat processing in patients with anxiety¹. While ABMT seems to be effective in adults with social anxiety disorder (SAD),^{2,3} its effect in youths with SAD and the potential treatment moderators are unclear. In 2016, Lee Pergamin-Hight and colleagues conducted a randomised controlled trial to explore the efficacy of ABMT in youths and the influence of possible moderators of treatment outcomes. They enrolled 67 youths (mean age 12.67 years) with SAD to the trial, and asked them to complete a dot-probe task that assessed selective attention. The participants were then randomly assigned to receive either ABMT or attention control training (ACT), delivered as two sessions per week for 8 weeks. The researchers measured the severity of anxiety at baseline, post-treatment

and at 3-months follow-up. Unexpectedly, both ABMT and ACT significantly reduced symptoms of clinician-rated and self-rated social anxiety from baseline to post-treatment. A further reduction in clinician-rated social anxiety symptoms only occurred at the 3-months follow-up. Age moderated social anxiety outcomes, with older youths showing a significant reduction in anxiety following ABMT (but not ACT) on self-report only. Attention control moderated self-reported treatment outcomes: those with low levels of attention control reported a greater reduction in social anxiety from pre-treatment to post-treatment with ABMT. The researchers conclude that both age and attention control can moderate ABMT effects on self-reported SAD symptoms. Consequently, developmental influences should be considered when implementing ABMT protocols in children.