

Intolerance of uncertainty predisposes to avoidance habit acquisition

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Many mental disorders are characterized by the presence of compulsions and incontrollable habits. Most studies on habit learning, both in animals and in humans, are based on positive reinforcement paradigms.

However, the compulsions and habits involved in some mental disorders may be better understood as avoidance behaviors, which involve some peculiarities, such as anxiety states, that have been shown to promote habitual responses.

Consequently, we studied habit acquisition by using a free-operant discriminated avoidance procedure. Furthermore, we checked whether intolerance of uncertainty could predispose to avoidance habit acquisition.

Participants learned to avoid an aversive noise presented either to the right or to the left ear by pressing two different keys. After a devaluation phase where the volume of the noise presented to one of the ears was reduced, participants went through a test phase identical to the avoidance learning phase except for the fact that the noise was never administered. Habit acquisition was inferred by comparing the rate of responses to the stimulus signaling the devalued reinforcer and to the stimulus signaling the non-devalued reinforcer. The results showed that intolerance of uncertainty was related to the absence of differences between the referred conditions, which entail avoidance habit acquisition.