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Can attentional bias modification inoculate people to withstand exposure to food advertising?

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Abstract

Background: In line with predictions from dual-process models, accumulating evidence shows that attentional bias modification can reduce unhealthy food intake. An important practical consideration is whether such modification can inoculate people to withstand exposure to real-world food cues (e.g., advertising). To test this, we investigated whether the positive effect of attentional bias modification on unhealthy food intake is resistant to television food advertising. Methods: In a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ experimental design, we used a dot probe paradigm to train 339 women (Mage = 20.13 years; MBMI = 23.24 kg/m²) to direct attention toward ('attend') or away from ('avoid') chocolate pictures. Following one or five training sessions, participants viewed and rated television advertisements of either chocolate or control products. Attentional bias for chocolate was measured before and after training. Chocolate consumption was measured by a taste test and habitual chocolate craving by self-report.

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Findings: Attentional bias increased in the 'attend' condition and decreased in the 'avoid' condition; however, the reduction in bias following exposure to chocolate advertisements was statistically significant only after five training sessions. Habitual chocolate craving moderated the effect of attentional bias modification on chocolate consumption, such that individuals with lower levels of chocolate craving ate less chocolate following the training, whereas those with higher levels of craving actually ate more. Discussion: Attentional bias modification has promise as a technique for helping people to overcome the temptation from real-world appetitive cues. However, more extensive training may be required for individuals with high levels of food craving.

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