

HYPOCHONDRIASIS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-VERIFICATION
AND CONFIRMATORY BIASES ALONG A CONTINUUM OF ILLNESS BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines how the role of illness fear activation affects the attentional biases of individuals varying in hypochondriacal tendencies. Participants were assigned to either a health protective condition or a health fear induction condition. Participants in the health fear induction condition were told that the presence of the enzyme PKR increases their susceptibility to meningitis. This feedback was intended to activate illness fears. In the health protective condition, the presence of the enzyme served as a preventative factor for meningitis, thus decreasing susceptibility and presumably minimizing illness fears. Participants then took part in a computer task in which they had the opportunity to choose from a series of confirming and disconfirming statements regarding the presence of a serious illness. Each set of information served as a makeshift doctor's feedback. Following the completion of the computer task, all participants completed questionnaires assessing hypochondriacal tendencies and the presence and severity of meningitis symptoms. The results indicated a positive correlation between the two measures of hypochondriasis as well as a positive correlation between one of those measures and the selection of illness confirming information. As this study was intended to be an analog for the interaction between physicians and their hypochondriacal patients, implications for facilitating such interactions are discussed.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who have been a constant source of strength, hope and determination through not only the past few years of graduate school, but my entire life. Mom, thank you for reminding me when it was okay to finally give myself a break and for being happy with me for whatever I did. Dad, thank you for cheering me up and being my buddy when things got rough with school. I love you both so much. Thank you for being wonderful parents!

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