

## PSYCHOLOGY

## Avoiding safe options

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Credit: Alexmillos/Alamy Stock Photo

Negative experiences make us cautious to avoid similar situations in the future. But would one bad burger make you forego all American food? People apparently differ in how much negative experiences generalize to similar situations. But what happens in the brain when people learn to avoid similar items or events? And is it possible to link this tendency of over-avoidance to ways of thinking or psychiatric traits?

This is the question that Agnes Norbury and colleagues of Cambridge University addressed across two studies. The researchers measured brain activity while participants played a game in which they pressed a button to avoid an electric shock when they saw specific pictures of flowers, but needed to avoid pressing the button for other flowers to avoid pain in the future. The second study used a similar task in an online setting, and collected data on participants' mood, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive traits.

The researchers found that when people reacted towards stimuli that look similar to the ones that signify danger, as though these predicted danger too, the response in visual brain areas towards the stimuli became more similar. The online study showed that people who have high anxiety scores are particularly prone to treat 'safe' events as though they predict negative consequences.

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**Anne-Marike Schiffer**

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