

Technology-driven treatment found to be as effective for social anxiety as psychiatric medications like Cipralex

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A new clinical trial conducted at Tel Aviv University has demonstrated an effective technology-driven alternative to psychiatric medications for

people with social anxiety. The groundbreaking study found that GC-MART (Gaze-Contingent Music Reward Therapy) is as effective in treating social anxiety disorder as drugs from the SSRI family. The study found that the innovative treatment, developed at TAU, relieved the symptoms of about 50% of the participating patients. The researchers hope that this therapy will soon be available as an effective alternative to psychiatric medications.

The study was led by Prof. Yair Bar-Haim, Director of the Adler Center for Child Development and Psychopathology, and of the Center for Traumatic Stress and Resilience at Tel Aviv University, together with research students Gal Arad and Omer Azriel from the School of Psychological Sciences at Tel Aviv University. Other collaborators included the NIH, the Tel Aviv Sourasky (Ichilov) and Sheba Medical Centers, and Prof. Amit Lazarov of TAU. The paper was published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.

Prof. Bar-Haim explains, "About 4%–12% of the population will develop [social anxiety](#) disorder at some stage of their lives. Quite often, people with this disorder avoid social situations—at a heavy interpersonal, professional, and economic price. At present, psychiatry and psychology offer sufferers two types of treatment: SSRI (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor) drugs, such as Cipralex, and CBT (Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy). CBT requires 12–20 sessions with a qualified clinical psychologist, in which symptoms are relieved through gradual exposure to the cause of anxiety. Thus, while effective, CBT is a complex treatment necessitating the presence of a highly skilled therapist and requiring patients to face their deepest fears, a requirement that often leads to treatment dropout.

"Because CBT is demanding, expensive, and not readily accessible, many patients turn to medication. However, psychiatric drugs like Cipralex have their own drawbacks: first, some patients prefer not to use

psychiatric drugs; second, entire populations, such as [young children](#), pregnant women, and individuals with specific diseases, cannot take SSRI drugs; and third, in some cases the drug has certain side effects."

Now, researchers from TAU have developed a third option, which is easy-to-use, quick and simple, and apparently no less effective than psychiatric drugs. Moreover, since the treatment is highly patient-friendly, a much lower dropout rate may be expected. In the clinical trial, 105 Israeli adults with social anxiety disorder were assigned into three groups: one group was treated with SSRI drugs, in this case Cipralex; a second group was treated with GC-MART; and a control group. After ten 30-minute training sessions, about 50% of the patients provided with the [new therapy](#) demonstrated significant improvement in their symptoms—a result similar to the outcome reported for patients who took Cipralex.

Prof. Bar-Haim stated, "The therapy we developed is based on eye-tracking combined with a musical reward. The patients choose the music they would like to hear—Israeli, classical, hip hop, etc., and is shown a simulation of a crowd on a computer screen. Usually, individuals with social anxiety disorder tend to dwell on scowling or threatening facial expressions, quickly picking them out and unable to look away. Consequently, they often interpret the crowd or [social situations](#) as hostile, negative, or critical.

"People without social anxiety disorder, on the other hand, prefer to focus on positive or neutral faces in a crowd. In the new therapy, the music chosen by the patient provides [positive feedback](#) for a normal focus of attention on [facial expressions](#) in the crowd presented on the screen. Gradually, through training, patients' biased attention is normalized, and symptoms recede.

"All participants in our trial underwent a comprehensive clinical

assessment both before and after the treatment and were also asked to report on the symptoms and their severity. Results indicated that the new treatment significantly reduced symptoms of social anxiety, with an efficacy that is similar to that of SSRI drugs."

Prof. Bar-Haim concludes, "Our findings are encouraging for both therapists and patients. With efficacy similar to that of an existing first line drug treatment, the new treatment does not require the patient to take medications regularly. The new treatment is simple and patient-friendly. It does not necessitate the prolonged intervention of a highly skilled psychologist, but rather interaction with social images on a screen, and therefore potentially offers accessible, effective, and convenient treatment for [social anxiety disorder](#)."

More information: Gal Arad et al, Attention Bias Modification Treatment Versus a Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor Or Waiting List Control for Social Anxiety Disorder: A Randomized Clinical Trial, *American Journal of Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1176/appi.ajp.20220533](#)

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