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Pandora searches the world literature for evidence, news and other sources on matters of interest (doesn't shy away from controversy) to bring to the reader. She welcomes comments and suggestions (via ip@rcpsych.ac.uk)



Oenophiles beware

If you believe that the price of your wine determines its quality, think again – your brain may be tricking you into thinking it tastes better. Researchers at Michigan State University demonstrated that the higher price creates the expectation that the quality (taste) will be better and this has a neurobiological basis. They carried out a wine-tasting session during which people were asked to taste a number of wine samples while undergoing brain functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Each sample tasting was preceded by information about the wine's price. The participants rated the pricier samples as tastier but, unbeknown to them, all samples were of the same wine! Their fMRI showed higher activation of the medial prefrontal cortex and also the ventral striatum when prices were higher. The authors conclude that the medial prefrontal cortex is involved in integrating the price comparison and thus the expectation into the evaluation of the wine. The ventral striatum, which forms the reward and motivation system, is significantly more activated with higher prices and it heightens the taste experience.

Schmidt, L., Skvortsova, V., Kullen, C., et al (2017) How context alters value: the brain's valuation and affective regulation system link price cues to experienced taste pleasantness. *Scientific Reports*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-08080-0>.

Expressing your worries in writing cools your brain

Many of us are chronic worriers and go to pieces when faced with a stressful task. Rather than reaching for a diazepam tablet, write down your feelings, say psychologists from Michigan. It is known that error-related negativity (ERN) immediately after errors is larger in people with anxiety. In a study of college students who were identified as chronically anxious, participants were asked to complete a computer-based task which measured their response accuracy and reaction times while undergoing electroencephalography (EEG). Half the students were asked to write down their inner thoughts and feelings about the upcoming test, for 8 minutes before the task, and the other half to write about what they did the previous day. Both groups performed at the same level for speed and accuracy but the students from the expressive writing group performed the test more efficiently,

in that they used fewer brain resources, with their ERN reduced. Expressive writing is known to help people deal with past traumas or stressful events and the authors argue that this simple technique can also help people, and particularly worriers, prepare for stressful tasks and to perform them with 'a cooler head', preventing burnout.

Schroder, H. S., Moran, T. P. & Moser, J. S. (2017) The effect of expressive writing on the error-related negativity among individuals with chronic worry. *Psychophysiology*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.12990>.

Eating as your biological night kicks in can make you fat

Obesity is an increasing problem. Bad diet and sedentary lifestyles are the known main culprits but a recent study implicates circadian rhythm. Circadian rhythms govern diurnal variations in important physiological functions (body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, some hormones) and have been linked to mood disorder.

Researchers examined the relationship between the timing of food consumption and the clock hour and endogenous circadian time, content of food intake and body composition. They recruited 110 participants with average age 20 in a 30-day cross-sectional study documenting sleep and circadian behaviours within their daily routine. They found that those with high body fat consumed more of their calories 1 hour closer to the melatonin onset (which signals the beginning of the biological night) compared with those with low body fat. The lesson is that if you want to stay lean, don't mess with your biological clock: have your meals earlier in the day but also eat less and exercise more!

McHill, A. W., Phillips, A. J. K., Czeisler, C., et al (2017) Later circadian timing of food intake is associated with increased body fat. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, <https://doi.org/10.3945/ajcn.117.161588>.

The Neanderthal in us

Before becoming extinct 40 000 years ago, Neanderthals interbred with our human ancestors during their primordial migration from Africa, leaving some of their DNA in us. The Neanderthals had highly developed visuospatial skills and relied less on social activities. The extent of inheritance of their genes influences the development of our brains. Researchers from the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) reported in 2012 that