Abstract

The World Health Organization (2012) has estimated that over 350 million people all over the world have suffered from depression. While there are many different reasons why individuals suffer from depression—the loss of a loved one or experiencing a trauma—why some individuals suffer depression and others are resilient is unclear. The objective of the present study is to investigate whether negative potentiation and/or positive attenuation biases in processing emotional stimuli in working memory contribute to increases in depression symptoms. One hundred and seventy three participants completed two experimental sessions: In the first session (T1) participants completed an emotion working memory task (the emotion n-back task) and a series of questionnaires including an assessment of depression symptomatology. In the second session (T2; approximately four months later) participants completed a follow-up depression symptomatology questionnaire. A hierarchical regression analyses was conducted to determine if time to disengage from happy and sad content at T1 predicted depression symptoms at T2. Results reveal that time to disengage from happy content, but not sad content predicted future depression symptoms. Specifically individuals who disengaged from happy content faster had higher levels of depression symptoms approximately 4 months later, whereas individuals who tended to disengage from happy content more slowly had lower depression symptoms four months later. These findings support the positive attenuation hypothesis of depression and suggest that difficulty keeping positive information active in WM may, over time, underlie increases in depression symptoms.