

Presenting Author: Jessica Clifton, M.A.

Title: Implicit emotional processes affect sexually-relevant behavior

Authors: Clifton, Jessica L., Rellini, Alessandra H., Burt, Keith, University of Vermont, Burlington VT; Janssen, Erick, University of Indiana

Emotions activated implicitly affect decision making and avoidance behavior. This study investigates the validity of a new method to assess the activation of emotions in response to implicit sex and threat stimuli and the effect of these implicit emotions on protective avoidance behavior relevant to risky sexual situations. Women ($N = 44$) ages 18-23, were asked to complete the ACTivation Task (ACT). In the ACT emotional responses are primed by 3 types of subliminal stimuli: Neutral, Sex, and Threat. Primes were followed by a picture of a young man. Participants were asked to quickly respond if they would accept a ride after a party from the depicted man. Also, participants completed the Trauma History Questionnaire (THQ; Green, 1996), a measure of physical and sexual abuse. Reaction time (RT; msec) was operationalized as a measure of avoidance behavior when the participants responded NO (rtNO), and approach behavior when they responded YES (rtYES) in the ACT task. Findings showed a significant effect of Condition (Neutral, Sex, Threat) on rtNO $F(2, 39) = 4.99, p < .01$. Faster rtNO occurred in the Threat compared to the Neutral condition, $p < .01$, and in the Threat compared to the Sex condition, $p < .01$. There were no effects of Condition on rtYES. Also no main or interaction effects were observed for a history of sexual abuse and sexual abuse X Condition. This study provides evidence that ACT is a valid measure of how emotions primed by threat stimuli affect behavior relevant to sexual behavior. Future studies incorporating the effect of explicit sexual stimuli may provide a more complete picture of the role of emotions activated by sexual and threat subliminal stimuli in decision making. Understanding emotion activation in risky decision making could add to the improvement of prevention programs seeking to reduce revictimization.