

# The Impact of Anxiety on Task Choice

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## Abstract

Anxiety impacts people in ways that they are unaware. In the presence of anxiety, attention is highly directed towards threatening information. Anxiety also impairs executive control processes, specifically inhibition and shifting. Both inhibition and shifting are necessary to switch tasks. In turn, task switching studies provide a useful means for examining anxiety. Recently, anxiety was found to impact task switching performance when threatening stimuli were present. In the current study, we examined whether the impact of anxiety extends to task choice. Subjects performed in a voluntary task switching environment where they chose between two simple categorization tasks involving either threatening (spider) stimuli or neutral (leaf) stimuli. Task choice and performance measures were correlated with scores on the Fear of Spiders Questionnaire. Subjects with higher levels of spider anxiety chose to perform the spider task less frequently and showed an overall slowing of performance. The freedom to choose responses based upon volition rather than external cues seemed to alter the impact of anxiety on task choice and performance.