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Individual Differences in Risk for Stress-Related Aggression

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According to Berkowitz (1990, 1994), the elicitation of negative affect results in aggressive behavior because they are both connected to a common associative network involving adaptive mobilization for defensive action. This presentation reports on a series of studies investigating individual differences (trait negative emotionality, gender, serotonin transporter genotype) in the coherence of this negative emotional priming of aggression across subjective, physiological (startle reflex), and behavioral (aggression) indices. In these studies, aggressive behavior was operationalized using a laboratory aggression procedure while participants were exposed or not exposed to a physical stressor. Analyses have revealed that persons high on trait negative emotionality, those carrying the short allele of the serotonin transporter gene (linked to emotional disorders) and men (as opposed to women) show greater increases in aggression following stress exposure, and this behavior coincides with greater startle reflex activation. In terms of gender differences, both state (startle reflex) and trait-related (temperament, serotonin transporter gene) correlates of negative emotionality are more strongly associated with the elicitation of aggressive behavior in men than in women. In fact, general stress reactivity in women may lead to the inhibition of aggression and greater internalizing feelings even under conditions that promote aggression (i.e., laboratory aggression paradigms). These results have implications for understanding different manifestations of emotional distress and potential processes underlying gender differences in aggression.

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