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The Price of Fear: Developing a behavioural assessment of fear-related avoidance incorporating dynamic response measures.

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Abstract: In economics, “willingness to pay” reflects subjective value which has been employed to price goods, and more recently, negative outcomes. The current project proposes a protocol for the behavioural assessment of fear-related avoidance based on how much an individual is willing to pay to avoid their fears.

The proposed protocol consists of a “card game” interface in which participants make choices in several stages. During baseline, participants chose between two decks that provide differential point rewards. Across a series of experimental blocks, feared stimuli (e.g. a spider image) were presented in addition to rewards when the richer deck was chosen. Rewards were then manipulated, in a staircase fashion, to establish the value of the feared stimulus. Mouse and eye movements were tracked in an attempt to track cognitive processes during decision-making and avoidance. Preliminary results indicate sensitivity of the protocol, and strengths and weaknesses will be discussed.