While all humans tend to pay more attention to emotional versus neutral stimuli (consider: if you look out into a sea of people, do you think you are more likely to pay attention to and later recall a person with a very angry facial expression or with a neutral facial expression?), some people appear to be constantly on alert for possibly threatening stimuli, a concept called attentional bias. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that people who suffer from high anxiety exhibit greater attentional bias toward threat. However, it is less clear how current mood may impact these attentional biases, and how mood-induced shifts in attentional bias (MIAS; for instance, attending to threat only once in an anxious mood) may be related to psychological functioning.

In a paper recently published in the journal Emotion, we demonstrated that MIAS toward threatening stimuli following an anxious mood induction predicted changes in state anxiety over a period of three weeks (see Figure 2 below), and that MIAS toward both threatening and friendly faces following a happiness mood induction predicted increases in life satisfaction over this same time period. These findings may indicate that small mood-induced shifts in attentional bias in daily life may accumulate over time and may play a role in the emergence of later anxiety or well-being, particularly after stress.

Angela Harris, working as an undergraduate in LaCasa, completed an honors thesis extending this research. In Angela’s study, thirty participants completed a task designed to assess attentional bias toward threatening (angry) and friendly (smiling) faces before and after watching an anxiety-inducing film clip. Skin conductance was recorded during the anxiety-inducing clip and during a neutral baseline clip. Participants also rated their life satisfaction and regular use of emotion regulation strategies demonstrated in previous research to be linked with healthy (cognitive reappraisal) and unhealthy (expressive suppression) outcomes. Results revealed that attentional bias toward positive faces following anxiety induction was significantly associated with self-reported use of reappraisal and (at a trend level) higher life satisfaction. Higher life satisfaction was significantly correlated with lower mean skin conductance during the anxiety-producing clip (relative to the neutral clip). These findings suggest that directing one’s attention toward positive cues following a state of anxiety could be an adaptive reaction to anxiety that shares variance with healthy forms of emotion regulation, and that reduced physiological response to anxiety could be related to greater life satisfaction.

**Principal Investigators:** Sarah R. Cavanagh, Angela Harris (undergraduate)