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The spiral of anxiety: a cognitive account

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Abstract: We present a series of propositions that explains why people find sitting quietly in a dark room strongly aversive (Wilson et al., 2014).

(i) Conflict-monitoring is an essential cognitive function; likely performed at the level of information processing conflicts (Botvinick et al, 2001) (ii) Memory is sensitized to processing conflicts; if a conflict has not been resolved in real-time, it is recalled when the mind is disengaged (iii) This is mind-wandering (Smallwood et al, 2003) (iv) Since mind-wandering privileges conflict recall for resolution, and resolving conflicts requires effort, mind-wandering becomes aversive (v) To avoid mind-wandering, a common strategy is to increase intensity of activity, so mind has no time to wander (vi) But increasing density of activity increases the number of possible information conflicts, which further deepens aversion to sitting quietly (vii) This is anxiety

Understanding the cognitive mechanics of this spiral of anxiety may help break it