Natalia Lawrence
University of Exeter

Winner of the BAP Public Communication Prize

Dr Natalia Lawrence conducts research on reward and emotional processing across a range of psychological disorders, in particular mood disorders and behavioural addictions like overeating and problem gambling. She has 16 years of experience conducting clinical experimental and brain imaging studies and has published 50 papers. She has worked at the Institute of Psychiatry (KCL), Oxford and Cardiff University, and the Medical College of Wisconsin (USA) and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Psychology (Translational Medicine) at the University of Exeter.

Her ongoing research develops and tests novel computer tasks that train self-control (response inhibition) to food images to reduce over-eating. Since 2011, her team have conducted several studies and one pilot randomized controlled trial on food response inhibition training, and have shown that it reduces snack food intake in the lab and increases weight loss in the real world following 4 short (10 minute) online training sessions (Lawrence et al. 2015, Appetite, 95: 17-28. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2015.06.009). Dr Lawrence was awarded the British Association for Psychopharmacology/Cambridge Cognition Award in 2014 for this translational research.

She is now trying to understand the mechanisms underlying training effects, seeing whether it can be combined with other interventions, and examining its effects when delivered to the public on a large scale via the web or as a smartphone-app. Working with the public is key to Dr Lawrence’s research and she was awarded this year’s BAP Public Communication Prize for her widespread media and public engagement on overeating and response inhibition training. This year she has worked with several newspapers to offer her online training to the general public and over 18,000 people have now tried it and provided valuable feedback, e.g. www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3151275/Can-train-brain-lose-weight-Play-online-game-claims-help-shed-0-7kg-ONE-WEEK.html

Dr Lawrence also disagrees with Michael Gove that people “have had enough of experts” and believes that academics need to engage with politicians and the public more. She has been researching how policy-makers access and use scientific evidence, recruiting 130 “citizen scientists” to interview their MPs about this important topic. The results have recently been published (for more information see www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2015/may/06/citizen-science-in-action-can-we-forge-a-smarter-democracy) and showed that 85% of parliamentarians supported the creation of an Evidence Information Service (EIS).This service would act as a rapid matchmaking and advisory service, working with existing parliamentary systems to connect politicians with the wider network of academics and professionals in science, technology, engineering, maths, medicine, humanities and the social sciences.