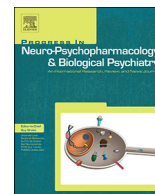




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## The opioid system in stress-induced memory disorders: From basic mechanisms to clinical implications in post-traumatic stress disorder and Alzheimer's disease



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### ABSTRACT

Cognitive and emotional impairment are a serious consequence of stress exposure and are core features of neurological and psychiatric conditions that involve memory disorders. Indeed, acute and chronic stress are high-risk factors for the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Alzheimer's disease (AD), two devastating brain disorders associated with memory dysfunction. Besides the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, stress response also involves the activation of the opioid system in brain regions associated with stress regulation and memory processing. In this context, it is possible that stress-induced memory disorders may be attributed to alterations in the interaction between the neuroendocrine stress system and the opioid system. In this review, we: (1) describe the effects of acute and chronic stress on memory, and the modulatory role of the opioid system, (2) discuss the contribution of the opioid system to the pathophysiology of PTSD and AD, and (3) present evidence of current and potential therapies that target the opioid receptors to treat PTSD- and AD-associated symptoms.

### 1. Introduction

Stress is an adaptive response that allows organisms to cope with environmental challenges that threaten their physiological or psychological homeostasis (Gold, 2015). This process involves the rapid and coordinated activation of the autonomic nervous system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, and facilitates the secretion of stress-related hormones, including corticotrophin releasing factor (CRF), adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), epinephrine, and corticoids (cortisol in humans and corticosterone in rodents) to prepare an organism for fight-or-flight or freeze responses (Gold, 2015). Single, acute, stress is essential to initiate an alarm response and focalize attention towards sources of potential threat. In contrast, prolonged or chronic activation of the stress system stimulates a permanent state of alertness that can result in long-lasting neurophysiological alterations and increased risk for the onset of several neuropsychiatric, and neurodegenerative disorders (McEwen, 2007).

Cognitive and emotional alterations are a serious consequence of

stress exposure and are core features of neurological and psychiatric conditions that involve memory disorders. For example, chronic stress impairs working and episodic memories and accelerates the onset of Alzheimer's disease (AD) (McEwen, 2007; Wilson et al., 2003); whereas acute, but intense, stress can facilitate the acquisition of negative emotional memories (de Quervain et al., 2016), and heighten the vulnerability to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Horn et al., 2016). Indeed, the cognitive and emotional alterations observed in AD and PTSD comprise morphological and functional changes in the limbic system, including areas such as the prefrontal cortex (PFC), hippocampus (HPC) and amygdala (AMYG) (Bailey et al., 2013; Karl et al., 2006; Sørensen et al., 2017). Remarkably, these brain structures do not only control multiple memory systems and higher cognitive functions, but also regulate the response to stress due to the high expression of glucocorticoid receptor and other stress-related receptors (McEwen et al., 2015).

The endogenous opioid system is activated by acute and chronic stress (Akil et al., 1986; Bodnar, 2017; Chen et al., 2004; Yilmaz et al.,

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2010) and its alterations seem to be a shared mechanism between PTSD and AD (Bailey et al., 2013; Mathieu-Kia et al., 2001). The opioid system consists of the G protein-coupled receptors mu ( $\mu$ ), kappa ( $\kappa$ ), delta ( $\delta$ ) and the Opioid receptor-like ORL (also known as nociceptin/orphanin FQ receptor-NOP), as well as the diverse opioid families: endorphins, enkephalins, and dynorphin (Bodnar, 2017). In general,  $\beta$ -endorphin binds to  $\mu$  and  $\delta$  opioid receptors, whereas dynorphin binds preferentially to  $\kappa$  receptors, and met- and leu-enkephalin bind to  $\delta$  and  $\mu$  receptors (Benarroch, 2012). Additional opioid peptides, such as nociceptin/orphanin FQ (N/OFQ) and endomorphin, which have respective affinities for ORL and  $\mu$  receptors, have been also described (Chu et al., 1999; Horvath, 2000; Meunier, 1997).

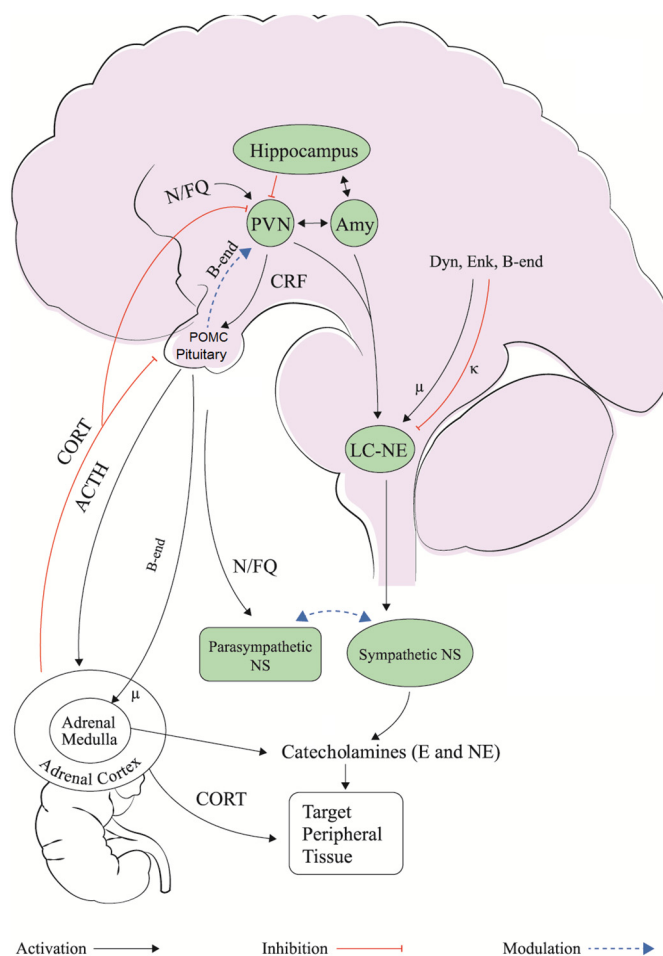
The opioid receptors are localized in regions of the central nervous system (CNS) that regulate the response to stress, including the hypothalamus, as well as in brain structures associated with emotional response, learning and memory (Contet et al., 2006). Indeed, a variety of stressors increase the release of endogenous opioid peptides and induce a differential activation of opioid-associated receptors in the HPC, AMYG and PFC in humans and rodents (Love et al., 2009; Tejada et al., 2015). This evidence suggests that the interaction between the stress and opioid systems play an important role in mediating memory processing under stress, and in the pathogenesis of stress-induced memory disorders. Moreover, the development of specific opioid receptor agonists and antagonists and the increasing use of gene delivery techniques highlight the potential of the opioid system as a therapeutic approach to treat cognitive dysfunction induced by stress (Bodnar, 2017; Lutz et al., 2014; Mercadante et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2003). In this review, we describe the role of the opioid system in (a) memory processes during stress response, and (b) the pathophysiology of psychiatric and neurological memory disorders associated with stress, with special focus on PTSD and AD. We also discuss therapies for these disorders based on the specific modulation of the opioid receptors.

## 2. Activation of the opioid system during stress

The stress response is mediated by the HPA axis and results in the release of stress hormones and endogenous opioid peptides. The HPA axis integrates responses of the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus (PVN), adenohypophysis, neurohypophysis and adrenal gland (Gold, 2015). During stress, the PVN secretes corticotrophin-releasing hormone (CRH, also known as CRF), which acts on corticotrophic cells of the adenohypophysis to release adrenocorticotropin (ACTH). ACTH induces glucocorticoid release by the zona fasciculata of the adrenal cortex. Later, corticoids modulate the activation of the HPA axis to suppress CRH and ACTH production and initiate a mechanism of negative feedback to cease the response to stress (Carrasco and Van de Kar, 2003).

Proopiomelanocortin (POMC) is a precursor polypeptide of ACTH and  $\beta$ -endorphin. Once the HPA axis is activated, POMC is cleaved in the pars intermedia and the pars distalis of the pituitary to release other stress-hormones such as alpha-MSH and Beta-lipotropin (Eipper and Mains, 1980; Rousseau et al., 2007). POMC is also synthesized by multiple neuronal groups of the arcuate nucleus (ArN) of the hypothalamus and the nucleus of the solitary tract, which project to limbic forebrain and midbrain areas, as well as the brainstem and spinal cord (Benarroch, 2012). Furthermore, neurons that express opioid precursors, peptides and receptors are located in brain structures involved in the stress response, such as the HPC, PVN, PFC, AMYG and locus coeruleus (LC) (Drolet et al., 2001; Tejada et al., 2015). These regions directly regulate the HPA axis and the sympathetic nervous system through the differential activation of opioid receptors (Fig. 1).

The relationship between stress and the opioid system was described for the first time in a phenomenon known as *stress-induced analgesia* (SIA), which refers to the anti-nociceptive response observed after stress exposure (Yilmaz et al., 2010; Butler and Finn, 2009). SIA has been described in several mammalian species, including rodents,



**Fig. 1.** Schematic representation of the HPA axis and autonomic nervous system in response to stress, and their regulation by the opioid system. Stressors initiate the activation of the HPA axis and induce the release of ACTH by the anterior pituitary gland and CORT by the adrenal gland. Neuroendocrine response to stress is reduced by corticoid-mediated negative feedback and the release of endogenous opioid peptides (red arrows). B-endorphins and N/FQ peptides respond to mild and acute stressors by increasing the activity of the PVN and the sympathetic nervous system. Activation of the  $\mu$  receptor leads to increased secretion of catecholamine by the adrenal medulla at baseline and in response to mild acute stressors (black arrows). During states of high stress, the opioid system induces a negative feedback to modulate central sympathetic outflow, limit catecholamine release (red arrows) or activate the parasympathetic nervous system as a regulatory mechanism (dashed arrows). B-endorphin modulates the activation of the HPA axis in response to stressors of high intensity or chronic stressors acting on CRF neurons (dashed arrows). **Abbreviations:** Amy (Amygdala), B-end (Beta-endorphin), CRF (Corticotropin-Releasing Factor), CORT (glucocorticoids), Dyn (dynorphin), E (epinephrine), Enk (enkephalin), LC (locus coeruleus), NE (norepinephrine), N/FQ (nociceptin/orphanin), NS (Nervous System), POMC (Proopiomelanocortin), PVN (paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus).

rhesus monkeys and humans, and following different experimental models, such as electrical and thermal stressors (Butler and Finn, 2009). For example, restraint stress induces analgesia to painful stimuli in rats. Interestingly, this effect is potentiated by the  $\mu$  receptor agonist, morphine (Calcagnetti and Holtzman, 1990). Naltrexone, a non-specific competitive opioid antagonist, reduces antinociceptive effects of stress by exposure to cold water (Lapo et al., 2003). Importantly, SIA has been also observed in several neuropsychiatric conditions, including PTSD or pain disorders (Fareed et al., 2013; Ibarra et al., 1994; Sher, 2004), thus, understanding its mechanisms may have important clinical implications.

Different stressors induce the release of endogenous opioids in areas

of the CNS involved in emotional response, learning and memory, and systemic physiological functions (i.e. energy homeostasis) (Henry et al., 2017). For example, acute immobilization increases immunoreactivity for dynorphins A and B in the nucleus accumbens (NAc) and HPC (Shirayama et al., 2004), whereas chronic immobilization increases the expression of enkephalins and dynorphin mRNA in the HPC (Chen et al., 2004). Acute stress induced by tail compression increases the release of  $\beta$ -endorphin in the ArN and NAc in rats (Marinelli et al., 2004), and exposure to the odors of predators increases the release of  $\beta$ -endorphin in the ArN and the expression of enkephalins in the AMYG (Hebb et al., 2004). Acute restraint stress enhances the expression of N/OFQ peptides in the hypothalamus, mediodorsal forebrain regions and limbic structures, especially the HPC by inducing corticosterone signaling through glucocorticoid receptors (GRs) in CA3, CA1 and dentate gyrus neurons (Nativio et al., 2012). In addition to the central effects, acute restraint stress also increases plasma levels of  $\beta$ -endorphin, which acts on peripheral tissues (i.e. gastrointestinal, cardiovascular and immune) (Coventry et al., 2001; Veening and Barendregt, 2015). In contrast, neither restraint stress nor chronic inflammatory stress influence the plasma levels of endomorphins in rats (Coventry et al., 2001).

In summary, stress increases dynorphin, endorphin, enkephalin and N/FQ peptides and later stimulates  $\mu$ ,  $k$ ,  $\delta$  and ORL receptors in different brain structures. This pattern of activation is determined by (i) the duration of the stressor (acute versus chronic) and (ii) the type of stressor. In general, opioid system activation may both initiate and subsequently modulate the magnitude of the HPA axis and sympathetic response to stress. In the following sections, we describe the effects of stress on memory and how activation of the opioid system modulates cognitive functioning, and discuss the implications for memory-related disorders.

### 3. Effects of stress on memory processing

Memory is a complex process that involves different phases, including acquisition, retrieval, consolidation and reconsolidation (Abel and Lattal, 2001). Memory *acquisition* refers to the initial learning of information, in which organisms begin to establish novel associations between environmental stimuli, physiological or behavioral responses and/or consequences (Kandel, 2001). Once this information is acquired, it can be stabilized for long-term recall during a *consolidation* process that involves synthesis of proteins and plastic changes at the synapses (Abel and Lattal, 2001; de Quervain et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2004). Memory *retrieval* refers to the process by which organisms recall previously learned information and provide an appropriate behavioral output. *Reconsolidation* is a process in which previously stored information is sensitive to disruption or modification (Nader et al., 2000b; Nader et al., 2000a).

The effects of stress on memory are mediated by different variables, including the phase of memory at which the stressor is applied (acquisition, retrieval and consolidation), the intensity of the stressor (low, moderate and high), the duration (acute versus chronic), and the type of memory that is being evaluated (hippocampal-dependent or hippocampal-independent) (Pinelo-Nava and Sandi, 2007). In general, information is remembered or becomes long-lasting when stress hormones, including glucocorticoids, are released at moderate levels. In contrast, very low or very high levels of stress could delay acquisition, impair memory retrieval or affect consolidation (Pinelo-Nava and Sandi, 2007; Sapolsky, 2015). This effect, known as the U-inverted shape effect, is mediated by the differential activation of the high-affinity mineralocorticoid receptors (MRs) and the low-affinity GRs. Indeed, glucocorticoid hormones bind to MRs under basal, non-stress conditions, and to GRs in response to stress (Pacak and Palkovits, 2001; Sapolsky, 2015).

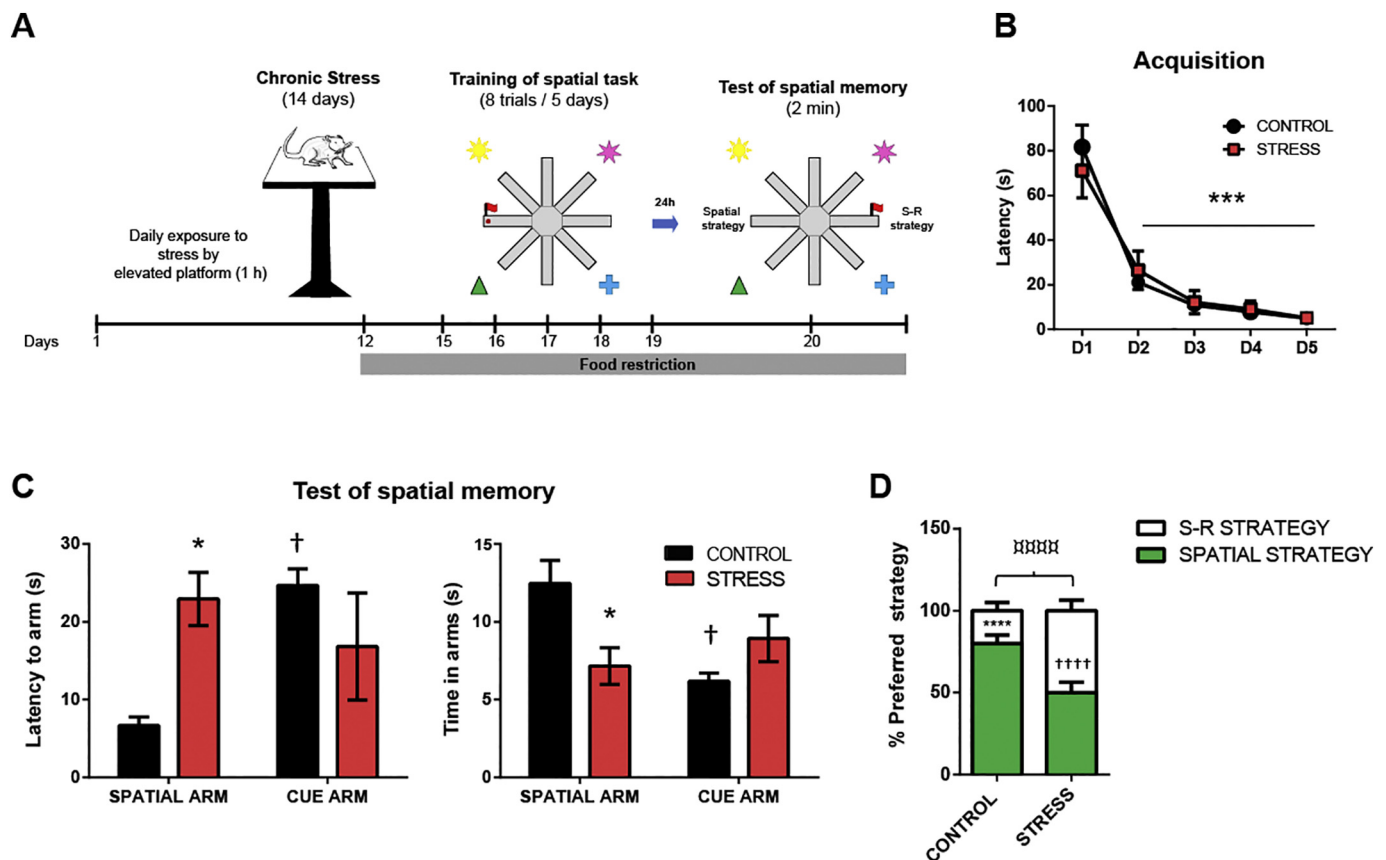
Mild to moderate levels of stress facilitate acquisition of episodic and spatial memories, which are highly associated with hippocampal function (Schwabe and Wolf, 2013). In fact, moderate levels of stress

lead to increased expression of markers of synaptic plasticity in the HPC, including the GluA1 AMPA receptor subunit, the brain-derived nerve factor (BDNF) receptor, TrkB, the phosphorylated cAMP response element binding protein (CREB), the activity-regulated cytoskeleton-associated protein (Arc), and the phosphorylated calcium/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase type II alpha (pCAM-kinase II-a) (Conboy and Sandi, 2010; Salehi et al., 2010; Sandi et al., 2005; Yuncai et al., 2016). In contrast, acute administration of high doses of corticosterone or exposure to high intensity stressors prior to retrieval disrupt object recognition, and contextual and spatial memories in rodents (Almaguer-Melian et al., 2012; De Quervain et al., 1998; Sandi et al., 2005; Vargas-Lopez et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2018). Importantly, the effects of high acute stress correlate with rapid loss of dendritic spine in hippocampal neurons (Chen et al., 2010), decreased expression of neural cell adhesion molecule (NCAM) in the HPC and PFC (Sandi et al., 2005) and altered connectivity between pyramidal cells and interneurons in the CA1 region of the HPC (Yu et al., 2018). Moreover, acute exposure to stress inhibit long-term potentiation (LTP) and lead to long-term depression (LTD) in the HPC (Howland and Cazakoff, 2010; Wong et al., 2007), further demonstrating the deleterious effects of stress on memory retrieval and HPC function.

Acute stress facilitates the acquisition or retrieval of emotional memories in humans and rodents (Aubry et al., 2016). For example, exposure to psychosocial stress promotes long-term retention of negative memories (Payne et al., 2007; Tollenaar et al., 2009), whereas administration of metyrapone, a corticoid inhibitor, impairs long-lasting retrieval of negative information in humans (Marin et al., 2011). Similarly, acute injection of corticoids or acute restraint stress enhance acquisition and retention of auditory fear conditioning in rodents (Cordero et al., 2003; Hui et al., 2004; Zorawski and Killcross, 2002). This effect is mediated by stress-induced activation of GRs and release of norepinephrine in the basolateral nucleus (BLA) of the AMYG (Roosendaal et al., 2006). Indeed, infusion of  $\beta$ -adrenergic receptor antagonists in the BLA disrupts acquisition and retrieval of fear conditioning (Bush et al., 2010) and prevents corticoid-induced memory enhancement of inhibitory avoidance in rats (Roosendaal et al., 2002). Likewise, acute stress induces delayed spinogenesis (Mittra et al., 2005) and strengthens synaptic plasticity in BLA (Yasmin et al., 2016). For example, single exposure to stress by immobilization enhances synaptic response to excitatory inputs in BLA and increases the number of dendritic spines in BLA principal neurons (Yasmin et al., 2016). Together, these findings demonstrate that acute stress leads to changes of synaptic plasticity in both the HPC and AMYG that result in contrasting effects on memory function.

Chronic exposure to stress, on the other hand, impairs different stages of hippocampal-dependent memories, and induces structural and functional alterations in the HPC (Conrad et al., 1996; Kleen et al., 2006; Lemaire et al., 2000; Magarinos et al., 1997). For example, chronic stress reduces neurogenesis in the dentate gyrus and induces atrophy of the apical dendrites in the hippocampal CA3 region (McEwen, 2016). Interestingly, repeated or chronic exposure to stress facilitates encoding and retention of rigid and inflexible forms of memory (i.e. stimulus-response), which are dependent on the dorsal striatum (Atsak et al., 2016; Medina et al., 2007; Schwabe et al., 2007; Schwabe and Wolf, 2010). In this perspective, we recently showed that chronic stress by elevated platform reduced retrieval of spatial memory, but enhanced the use of stimulus-response memories (Fig. 2) (Torres-Berrio and Nava-Mesa, 2018). This finding further supports previous evidence showing that post-training administration of corticosterone in the dorsolateral striatum accelerates the consolidation of procedural learning, and therefore, determines the switch between the use of spatial vs. stimulus-response strategies in rats (Siller-Pérez et al., 2017).

Further studies are required to identify the factors that protect individuals against the effects of stress on memory dysfunction and cognitive decline. Such studies are urgently needed given the strong association between stress exposure and neuropsychiatric and



**Fig. 2.** Chronic stress impairs spatial memory and facilitates stimulus-response memory in a radial arm maze dissociation task. (A) Timeline of experimental procedure and diagram of the radial arm dissociation task (RADT), adapted from (Schwabe et al., 2008). (B) Chronic stress prior to training did not affect acquisition of the RADT. Latency: one-way ANOVA for repeated measures: Training session:  $[F_{(4,70)} = 41.71; p < 0.0001]$ ; Tukey test:  $***p < 0.001$ , different from D2). (C) Chronic stress increased latency to enter (left panel) and reduced time spent (right panel) in the spatial arm. Latency: two-way ANOVA (stress by arm interaction:  $[F_{(1,20)} = 9.05; p = 0.0069]$ ; Tukey test:  $p < 0.05$ ). Time spent in arms: two-way ANOVA (stress by arm interaction:  $[F_{(1,20)} = 10.65; p = 0.0039]$ ; Tukey test:  $p < 0.05$ ).  $p < 0.05$ : \* and †, spatial arm vs. control. (D) Reduced preference for spatial strategies and enhanced preference for stimulus-response strategies in rats exposed to chronic stress. Preferred strategy: stress by arm interaction:  $[F_{(1,20)} = 30.86; p < 0.0001]$ ; stress  $[F_{(1,20)} = 30.86; p < 0.0001]$ ; arm  $[F_{(1,20)} = 0.0; p = 0.99]$ ; Tukey test:  $p < 0.0001$ : \*\*\*\*, spatial strategy; † † † †, spatial strategy vs. control; \*\*\*\*, control.  $N = 6$ /group.

neurodegenerative disorders. Indeed, impairment of HPC-dependent memory vs. enhancing of AMYG-dependent and striatum-dependent memories may account for the differential effects of acute and chronic stress on disorders such as AD, and PTSD. Strong evidence demonstrates that the opioid system regulates memories that are associated with HPC, striatal and AMYG function (Le Merrer et al., 2013; Knoll et al., 2011). Furthermore, susceptible mice to chronic stress exhibit decreased levels of ENK mRNA in the BLA and of  $\delta$  opioid receptor in the ventral HPC (Henry et al., 2018); whereas low levels of  $\mu$  opioid receptor are associated with reduced vulnerability to stress (Komatsu et al., 2011). In this context, the actions of the opioid system on specific brain circuits during stress response may be at play in the differential susceptibility to those memory alterations observed in neuropsychiatric disorders.

#### 4. Stress-induced activation of the opioid system and memory processing

Animal models and clinical case reports provide evidence that opioid agonists have amnesic properties (Daumas et al., 2007; McGaugh, 1983; Chavant et al., 2011), whereas opioid antagonists exhibit more complex actions, depending on the receptor specificity, dose (U-inverted pattern) and emotional state of the subject (Aigner and Mishkin, 1988; Bodnar, 2017; Katzen-Perez et al., 2001). Many of the effects of opioids drugs on memory are either direct or mediated by other neurotransmitter systems, including the dopaminergic system

(Ukai and Lin, 2002).

The interaction between opioid system and stress during memory has been studied by pharmacological, behavioral and electrophysiological approaches. For example, naloxone prevents acute stress- or dexamethasone-induced impairment of memory retrieval in passive avoidance (Rashidy-Pour et al., 2004) or object recognition memory (ORM) tasks (Liu et al., 2016), most likely by acting on the  $\mu$  opioid receptor (Liu et al., 2016). Moreover, transgenic mice lacking *dynorphin* gene do not display impaired ORM induced by stress (Carey et al., 2009), suggesting that dynorphin/ $\kappa$  opioid receptor signaling may also mediate the effects of stress on memory. In our laboratory, we evaluated the effects of systemic administration of naltrexone during the pre-training of an object recognition memory task (ORM) in rats subjected to acute restraint stress. We found that acute stress impaired short-term object recognition, but this effect was prevented by naltrexone treatment. Interestingly, acute stress enhanced long-term object recognition, however, high doses of naltrexone impaired stress-induced long-term memory facilitation, suggesting differential effects of the opioid system at short and long terms following stress exposure (Nava-Mesa et al., 2013b).

Enhanced activation of endogenous opioids in the HPC may account for the deleterious effects of acute stress on memory. Indeed, acute exposure to immobilization induces a significant increase in dynorphins A and B, while chronic stress increases prodynorphin and enkephalin levels in the HPC (Chen et al., 2004; Shirayama et al., 2004). The following activation of the respective opioid receptors in CA1 and CA3

hippocampal pyramidal neurons affect neuronal excitability (Madamba et al., 1999), presynaptic neurotransmitter release and interneurons activity (Klenowski et al., 2015). In this context, intrahippocampal administration of opioid agonists impairs spatial memory (Daumas et al., 2007; Sandin et al., 1998), whereas intrahippocampal injection of naltrexone blocks impairment of spatial memory induced by glucocorticoids (Sajadi et al., 2007). Together, these findings suggest that increased activation of the opioid system induced by stress have amnesic effects, which can be prevented by naltrexone or naloxone.

Opioid receptors, including  $\mu$ ,  $\kappa$ , and  $\delta$  are highly expressed in the AMYG and are activated during stress and emotional memory (Mansour et al., 1995; Mansour et al., 1988; Hebb et al., 2004). Indeed, fear conditioning increases the expression of  $\kappa$  opioid receptor mRNA in the BLA, whereas the  $\kappa$  opioid receptor antagonist, JDTic, decreases conditioned fear in rats (Knoll et al., 2011). In addition, several studies indicate that opioid system of the AMYG influences noradrenergic and GABAergic systems during memory consolidation and emotional responses (Ferry and McGaugh, 2000; Klenowski et al., 2015; Liberzon et al., 2002). However, the deleterious effects of stress on contextual memory retrieval seem to be independent on the activation of opioid receptors in the AMYG. For example, systemic administration of naltrexone prevents stress-induced memory impairment in a step-through passive-avoidance task. In contrast, microinjection of naltrexone into the basolateral (BLA) AMYG or the CA1 region of the HPC has no protective effects (Rezvanfard et al., 2011). This evidence suggests the involvement of several brain structures, circuits and neurotransmitter systems, as well as complex interactions between stress and opioid system pathways associated with contextual memory. Below, we present three different models that might explain the actions of these antagonists on memory.

(A) Antagonism of opioid receptors may reverse plastic alterations in memory brain circuits induced by acute stress. For example, it has been reported that naltrexone blocks the inhibition of LTP induced by acute stress (Shors et al., 1990). Likewise, Naloxone enhances LTP at Schaffer collateral–CA1 synapses (Zhao et al., 2004), and might counteract LTP inhibition and LTD induction by stress. However, the effects of opioid blockers may be variable and dependent on the specific afferent projection activated. For example, naloxone may block the induction of lateral perforant path–CA3 LTP, unless is induced by strong coactivation of the medial perforant pathway (Martinez et al., 2011). This result indicates that the projections of the perforant path to the hippocampal CA3 region have different mechanisms of LTP induction (opioid and non-opioid).

(B) Opioid antagonists might affect the activity of the HPA axis during stress, and therefore, modify plasma corticosterone levels. For instance, naloxone or naltrexone can enhance or reduce corticosterone release after acute stress depending on the type of stressor (i.e. forced swimming, cold water, acute motion stress) (Douglas et al., 1998; Odio and Brodish, 1990; Retana-Márquez et al., 2009). Moreover, the highly selective  $\kappa$  receptor agonist, U-50488H, but not  $\mu$  and  $\delta$  agonists, stimulates ACTH and cortisol release in rhesus monkeys, an effect that is blocked by the  $\kappa$  antagonist, nor-Binaltorphimine (Pascoe et al., 2008). These divergent effects of opioid antagonists on the HPA axis could be due to differences in the role of the opioid system during each type of stress, as well as pharmacodynamic diversity among the various opioid drugs. However, some other studies involving acute immobilization and restraint found that naltrexone did not impact corticosterone levels (Trudeau et al., 1991; Vazquez-Palacios et al., 2004). Finally, one cannot disregard the fact that opioid drugs modify the levels of other stress-associated hormones (i.e. catecholamine), which may, in turn, affect memory function by acting directly on the CNS or through the peripheral nervous system (Fig. 1). For instance, stress activates two distinct pools of norepinephrine (NE) systems: a central pool associated with the LC in the brainstem, and a peripheral pool, associated with the sympathetic nervous system (Atzori et al., 2016). Central activation of adrenergic receptors ( $\alpha_1$ ,  $\alpha_2$  and  $\beta$ ) modulates working and fear

memories (Atzori et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2015), whereas, peripheral catecholamines, which cannot cross the blood–brain barrier, may alter memory via the afferent sensory nerves (Tank and Wong, 2015).

(C) Although less probable, there is a possibility that opioid antagonists compete with corticoids hormones for receptor binding during stress. This concept is based on the description of a corticoid membrane receptor in the amphibian *Taricha granulosa* (Evans et al., 1998) that exhibits binding affinity for naloxone (Evans et al., 2000). In rodents, the glucocorticoid membrane receptors (GMRs) have rapid and non-genomic effects in response to stress (Dorey et al., 2011; Sajadi et al., 2006), however, the binding of opioid antagonists to GMRs remains unclear.

Opioid agonists have been also studied in the context of stress and memory. In a classic report, parallel exposure to stress by immobilization and morphine administration impaired memory consolidation of a passive avoidance task. Indeed, acute stress exacerbated morphine-induced memory impairment (Castellano et al., 1984). This effect indicates that  $\mu$  receptors and stress hormones interact in a synergistic manner during memory consolidation. Interestingly, selective dopaminergic agonists of D1 and D2 receptors antagonized the effects of the opiate on memory consolidation (Castellano et al., 1994). Therefore, it is possible that the effects of the opioid system on memory during stress require other neurotransmitter systems and specific intracellular pathways. For example, the opioid system and stress may interact through CREB signaling, GRs, norepinephrine and GABA neurotransmitter systems (Bali et al., 2015).

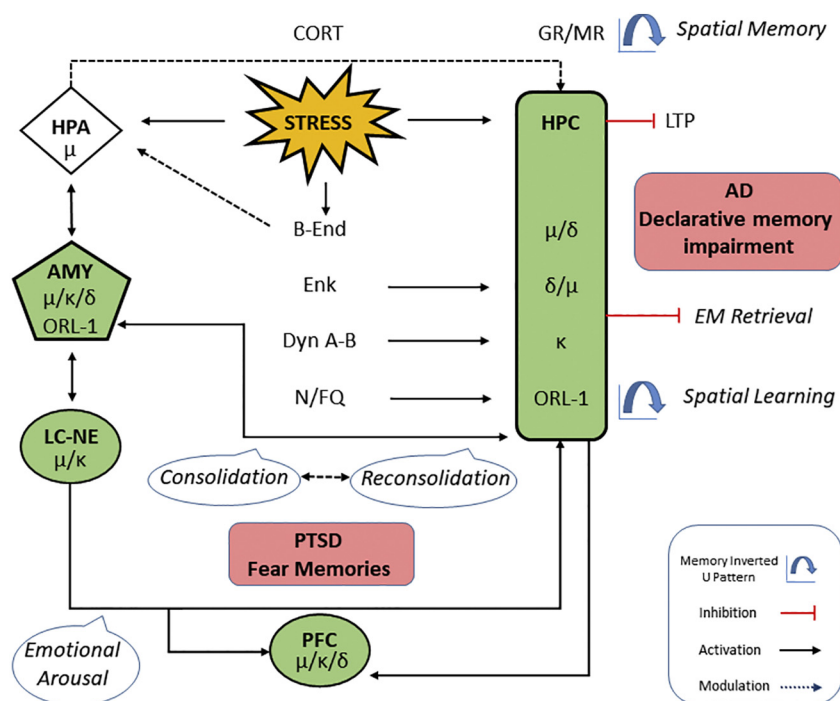
Although ORL-1 and  $\mu$  receptors share some common intracellular signaling pathways, differential physiological effects have been reported (Bodnar, 2017; Hawes et al., 1998; Wallington et al., 2002). As mentioned previously, acute stress increases N/OFQ peptide levels in the HPC (Nativio et al., 2012). Accordingly, stress intensity might be related to central N/OFQ peptide levels, thereby possibly underlying the U-inverted effect on memory. However, recent explanations for the inverted-U-shaped relationship between stress intensity and memory consider the differential activation of corticoid and opioid receptors, the type of information that is learned, inter-individual characteristics and emotional factors (Katzen-Perez et al., 2001; Luksys and Sandi, 2011; Salehi et al., 2010).

Some studies have suggested an anti-stress effect of the N/OFQ system in anxiety-like behavior and SIA (Bali et al., 2015; Ciccocioppo et al., 2014; Gerashchenko et al., 2011). Furthermore, systemic and central AMYG infusion of ORL-1 receptor agonist (SR-8993), in a rodent model, prevents consolidation of fear memory of an aversive event (Andero et al., 2013). In addition, ORL antagonists (i.e. [Nphe1]-Nociceptin and NC-NH2) reverse N/OFQ-induced impairment of consolidation of passive avoidance task and spatial memory (Andero, 2015), whereas OFQ/N receptor antagonist (Nphe(1)]nociceptin(1-13)NH(2) enhances retention of inhibitory avoidance (Roosendaal et al., 2007). However, the role of N/OFQ on memory acquisition and retrieval during stress remains unclear.

In summary, opioid antagonists could prevent the deleterious effects of stress on memory retrieval by acting preferentially on  $\kappa$  and  $\mu$  receptors in the HPC. Facilitation effects of stress on memory consolidation may involve opioid peptides on AMYG. Moreover, the U-inverted shape effect of glucocorticoids on memory displays similar characteristics to the effects mediated by the opioids peptides released by stress. In the following section, we will discuss the clinical implications of the modulation of the opioid system in stress-induced memory disorders.

## 5. Clinical implications

The opioid system plays a dual modulatory role in neuropsychiatric disorders induced by stress where memory dysfunction is a hallmark (Fig. 3). PTSD and AD are two debilitating conditions characterized by severe alterations in emotional and episodic memories, respectively



**Fig. 3.** Role of the opioid system in the pathophysiology of AD and PTSD. Interaction between major brain structures and specific opioid receptors are represented. The effects of stress on memory depend on the specific memory phase (i.e. acquisition, retrieval and consolidation), the differential activation of the opioid receptors and the brain circuits involved. Release of opioid peptides induced by chronic stress, such as enkephalins and dynorphins, impact preferentially the HPC during AD progression. The hippocampal-amygdala–prefrontal cortex circuit, involved in consolidation and reconsolidation processes, has a main role in PTSD. Likewise, norepinephrine-mediated emotional arousal may enhance traumatic and fear memories.

**Abbreviations:** AD (Alzheimer’s disease), AMY (amygdala), B-End (Beta-endorphin), CORT (corticosteroids), Dyn (dynorphin), Enk (enkephalin), EM (episodic memory), GR (glucocorticoid receptor), HPC (hippocampus), HPA (hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis), LC-NE (Locus Coeruleus/Norepinephrine system), LTP (long-term potentiation), MR (mineralocorticoid receptor), N/FQ (nociceptin/orphanin), PFC (prefrontal cortex), PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder).

(Gold and Budson, 2008; Guina et al., 2016). In the following section, we will discuss the role of opioid system in the pathophysiology of PTSD and AD. Furthermore, we will describe and propose some therapeutic approaches to treat these disorders based on the pharmacological modulation of  $\mu$ ,  $\kappa$ ,  $\delta$  and ORL-1 opioid receptors and neurobiological mechanisms.

### 5.1. PTSD

PTSD is a devastating mental health disorder triggered by a severe life-threatening experience or a situation that involves feelings of helplessness or intense fear. This psychiatric disorder is characterized by nightmares, unwanted memories and intrusive flashbacks of the traumatic event (Guina et al., 2016). These symptoms are caused by the perturbation in acquisition, consolidation and reconsolidation of emotional memories during stressful situations. For instance, exposure to a traumatic trigger results in a fragmented and involuntary retrieved memory trace (intrusion) associated with autonomic responses and fear symptoms (Brewin, 2011). According to Van Marle (2015), the lack of appropriate consolidation of traumatic experiences within a cortical network containing an autobiographical context induces reactivation of traumatic memory traces, which are reexperienced as if they were happening in the present (van Marle, 2015).

The pathophysiology of PTSD involves the dysfunction of the AMYG-PFC pathway (Mahabir et al., 2016, Mahabir et al., 2015) as well as increased sensitivity of the HPA axis to negative glucocorticoid feedback (Nijdam et al., 2015; Yehuda, 2006) and noreadrenergic hyperactivity (Strawn and Geraciotti, 2008). There are also alterations in the expression of neuropeptides, hormones and neurotransmitters such as CRF, serotonin, glutamate/GABA, catecholamine, neuropeptide Y and opioids in brain areas involved in cognitive function such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), insular cortex (IC), and HPC (Sherin and Nemeroff, 2011).

The endogenous opioid system participates directly in the pathophysiology of PTSD and other stress-induced psychiatric disorders (Henry et al., 2017). For example, imaging studies have shown that PTSD patients exhibit diminished  $\mu$  opioid receptor binding potential in the ACC, in comparison to healthy controls, whereas trauma exposure, with or without PTSD, was associated with reduced  $\mu$  opioid receptor

binding potential in the extended AMYG, nucleus accumbens and IC (Liberzon et al., 2007). Furthermore, individuals suffering from PTSD exhibit reduced plasma levels of  $\beta$ -endorphin at baseline (Hoffman et al., 1989), but increased levels immediately after exercise as compared to controls (Hamner and Hitri, 1992). Likewise, high levels of  $\beta$ -endorphin in the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) of patients with PTSD correlate with intrusive and avoidant symptoms (Baker et al., 1997), suggesting that alterations in the opioid system may readily detected in peripheral and central fluids in vulnerable individuals to stress. Evidence from preclinical models demonstrate that opioid receptors mediate extinction of fear conditioning in rats (Cole et al., 2011; McNally and Westbrook, 2003), whereas altered expression of enkephalin and  $\delta$  opioid receptor are observed in susceptible mice to chronic stress (Henry et al., 2018).

The relationship between SIA, the opioid system and PTSD has been previously studied (Ibarra et al., 1994; Sher, 2004). For example, war veterans with PTSD exposed to a traumatic stressor (combat videotape) display reduced pain sensitivity in comparison to PTSD patients treated with naloxone or control patients (Van der Kolk et al., 1989; Pitman et al., 1990). This indicates that PTSD patients may exhibit higher activation of the endogenous opioid system during re-exposure to traumatic events. Similarly, repeated stress may lead to opioid abuse in PTSD-susceptible patients through mechanisms of opioid tolerance and dependence. Indeed, there is a high comorbidity of opioid abuse and PTSD (Clark et al., 2001; Fareed et al., 2013).

Because the opioid system modulates stress-induced memory consolidation, opioid receptor agonists and antagonists may have therapeutic potential for PTSD. In fact, naltrexone has been used as a coadjutant drug in the treatment of patients with long-lasting traumatic memories and comorbid alcohol dependence (Lubin et al., 2002; Petrakis et al., 2012, Petrakis et al., 2006). Furthermore, naltrexone decreases the frequency of flashbacks and other dissociative phenomena in patients with borderline personality disorders (Bohus et al., 1999). These dissociative symptoms are also observed in patients with PTSD. In addition to  $\mu$ ,  $\kappa$  and  $\delta$  opioid receptor blockade, the modulation of nociceptin (ORL-1) receptors reduces consolidation of fear-related memories without affecting other memory stages (i.e. acquisition or extinction) in mice (Sartor et al., 2016), and may therefore serve as a therapeutic target for memory adjustment in PTSD.

Rodent models of PTSD, such as single-prolonged stress (SPS), leads to increased levels of N/OFQ peptides in CSF and serum, as well as anxiety-like behavior and long-lasting hyperalgesia (Zhang et al., 2012a). Indeed, the N/OFQ receptor antagonist, JTC-801, ameliorates anxiety- and pain-like behaviors in the SPS models (Zhang et al., 2015a), suggesting that modulators of N/OFQ may be promising for the treatment of emotional symptoms and for co-morbid PTSD and pain. For example, immobilization-fear conditioning (a PTSD-like mouse model) induces high expression of the *Oppl1* mRNA, which encodes for ORL-1 receptor, in the AMYG, whereas systemic and AMYG infusion of the highly-selective ORL-1 agonist, SR-8993, interferes with consolidation of fear memory (Andero et al., 2013). Importantly, single nucleotide polymorphisms in the *OPRL1* gene has been associated with self-reported history of childhood trauma and PTSD symptoms (Andero et al., 2013), further highlighting the importance of ORL-1 as therapeutic target of PTSD.

Accumulating evidence indicates the potential role of opioid agonists in the treatment of PTSD. For instance, administration of systemic morphine after training disrupts persistence of contextual fear memory in rats (Porto et al., 2015). In adult humans, acute administration of morphine blocks fear conditioning and the risk of PTSD after a traumatic injury (Bryant et al., 2009; Stoddard et al., 2009; Holbrook et al., 2010; Melcer et al., 2014), whereas in children this effect seems to occur in a dose-dependent manner (Nixon et al., 2010; Stoddard et al., 2009).

Because opioid receptor agonists and antagonists have differential actions and windows of administration, opioid agonists might have therapeutic effect during acute traumatic painful events in PTSD, while opioid antagonists might have efficacy once the traumatic long-lasting memory and dissociative symptoms have been consolidated and established. Interestingly, other studies show that repeated administration of morphine may interrupt memory consolidation and the associated fear learning which generate PTSD (Szczytkowski-Thomson et al., 2013). A recent observational study in war veterans with PTSD reported that buprenorphine improves PTSD symptoms compared with other opioid medications (Seal et al., 2016). In fact, buprenorphine is an opioid with mixed agonist (ORL-1 receptor) and antagonist ( $\kappa$  and  $\delta$  receptors) effects, with a complex pharmacodynamics for  $\mu$  receptors (partial agonist and antagonist according to dosage level) (Lutfy and Cowan, 2004).

Some reports indicate that the antinociceptive effects of the opioid agonist methadone is potentiated by an ultralow dose of the opioid antagonist naltrexone (Chindalore et al., 2005; Cruciani et al., 2003). Therefore, this synergistic drug combination may have substantial therapeutic potential for treating painful traumatic experiences. However, more clinical trials are needed to optimize the ratio of opioid agonist/antagonist and to identify the opioids involved in PTSD pathophysiology, as well as opioid receptors susceptible to pharmacological modulation.

## 5.2. Alzheimer's disease (AD)

AD is the most common progressive neurodegenerative disorder worldwide. It is characterized by cognitive decline, brain atrophy due to specific neuronal loss, and presence of two neuropathological features: extracellular amyloid- $\beta$  (A $\beta$ ) plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles (Goedert and Spillantini, 2006). Although reduced exposure to stress does not prevent dementia (Tsolaki et al., 2003), susceptibility to psychological stress is a risk factor for AD (Wilson et al., 2003). In fact, several epidemiologic and clinical studies have shown that chronic stress early in life increases the risk of AD (Johansson et al., 2010; Tsolaki et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2003). Animal models indicate that chronic stress leads to inflammatory processes and metabolic dysfunction in the HPC, PFC and AMYG (Machado et al., 2014). Oxidative stress, excitotoxicity and synaptic plasticity impairment are part of the pathophysiology of AD induced by stress

(Gonzalez-Reyes et al., 2017; Rothman and Mattson, 2010). Indeed, human brain-imaging studies have shown hippocampal atrophy in patients subjected to repetitive traumatic stress experiences (McEwen, 2000) and functional imaging studies have shown that AD patients have metabolic alterations on hippocampal subregions (Moreno et al., 2007; Wu and Small, 2006). This regional susceptibility is associated with aging prior to dementia, PTSD and depression (McEwen, 2000).

Two of the most characteristic symptoms of AD, which are part of the initial cognitive decline, are impairments in declarative memory and disorientation (Gold and Budson, 2008). This is caused by hippocampal and entorhinal cortical dysfunction. Several studies have shown that opioid system dysfunction (hyper- or hypo-activation) is associated with the pathogenesis of AD, including increased A $\beta$  generation (Sarajärvi et al., 2011; Teng et al., 2010), hyperphosphorylation of tau protein (Anthony et al., 2010) and neuroinflammation (Cai and Ratka, 2012; Liang et al., 2016). Changes in opioid peptide levels in the CSF of patients with AD, as well as changes in opioid receptor binding and distribution, found in postmortem brains, suggest that opioid system dysfunction is associated with cognitive impairment in AD (Cai and Ratka, 2012). However, despite the large amount of experimental evidence, it is not clear if these changes are part of the cascade that causes the cognitive deficit, or if this effect is a compensatory mechanism against neurodegeneration.

There is evidence showing that soluble and aggregated forms of A $\beta$ 1-40 or 1-42 compromises G protein-coupled receptors function on AD models *in vivo* and *in vitro* (Janickova et al., 2013; Thathiah and De Strooper, 2011). Indeed, opioid receptors are G-protein coupled receptors linked to G protein-coupled inwardly-rectifying potassium channels (GirK) channels (Mitrovic et al., 2003), which mediate hyperpolarization and synaptic inhibition. Accordingly, we showed for the first time that A $\beta$  (25-35) decreased inhibitory currents in CA3 pyramidal neurons, likely by decreasing GirK channels activity, and leading to hippocampal hyperexcitability *in vitro* (Nava-Mesa et al., 2013a; Nava-Mesa et al., 2014). Similarly, A $\beta$  25-35 can reduce GirK channels expression (GirK2, 3, and 4 subunits) (Mayordomo-Cava et al., 2015), whereas GirK agonist (ML297) reduce synaptic, network, and cognitive deficits observed in a mouse model of early AD (Sanchez-Rodriguez et al., 2017). Although the role of GirK channels in the pathophysiology of AD remained to be characterized, it is plausible that A $\beta$ -induced intracellular signaling dysfunction in the opioid system as well as opioid effectors (i.e. calcium and potassium channels).

The endogenous opioid system influences the presynaptic and postsynaptic activity of many transmitter systems in cognitive function (Mizuno and Kimura, 1996; Shen and Johnson, 2002). In this regard, altered protein levels of AMPA and NMDA receptors in the HPC are observed in aged prodynorphin KO mice (Menard et al., 2014). Correspondingly, increased expression of dynorphin and polymorphisms in the *PRODYNORPHIN* gene have been associated with memory impairment during aging and in AD patients (Kölsch et al., 2009; Yakovleva et al., 2007). As we mentioned before, increased activation of  $\kappa$ -opioid receptors by dynorphins may explain stress-related memory impairment. Therefore, the opioid system is a promising therapeutic target for age-related cognitive decline and AD progression.

At an intracellular level, chronic opiate administration activates components of the cyclic AMP pathway in a manner similar to chronic stress (Valentino and Van Bockstaele, 2001). Furthermore, higher methadone doses increase proinflammatory cytokines and contribute to neuroinflammation (Chan et al., 2015). Also, OFQ/N system mediate inflammatory events during stress (Mallimo and Kusnecov, 2013). Therefore, abnormal opioid system activation induced by chronic stress may be related to the pathophysiology of AD and cognitive deficit. For example, Meilandt and colleagues (Meilandt et al., 2008), found over-expression of enkephalin in brain tissue derived from patients with AD. Furthermore, they reported that high expression of the opioid precursor preproenkephalin and met-enkephalin was related to the cognitive and behavioral alterations in the transgenic animal model of AD.

Different neurotransmitters systems (i.e. GABA) and ion channels can be targeted by drugs to attenuate the cognitive symptoms in early-stages of AD and rapid progressive dementia, as well as patients with mild cognitive impairment (MCI), a prodromal stage of AD (Mutis et al., 2017; Nava-Mesa et al., 2014). New perspectives in the pathophysiology of AD suggest that synaptic dysfunction precedes neurodegeneration and is the primary event in early memory impairment (Palop and Mucke, 2010; Selkoe, 2002). Similarly, excitatory and inhibitory imbalance in several neurotransmitter systems (i.e. glutamatergic, cholinergic and GABAergic) underlie synaptic dysfunction in the HPC and AMYG during AD progression (Nava-Mesa et al., 2014; Palop et al., 2007; Verret et al., 2012). In this context, current treatments for AD symptoms include the NMDA receptor blocker, memantine, and cholinesterase inhibitors (Gold and Budson, 2008). However, to date there are no effective pharmacological interventions to treat AD.

Considering that dysregulation of endogenous opioid peptides is observed in AD, novel therapeutic approaches could target opioid receptors to potentially induce clinical benefits. In this regard, inactivation of the enkephalin receptor with the irreversible  $\mu$  receptor antagonist  $\beta$ -funaltrexamine can ameliorate cognitive impairment in a mouse model of AD (Meilandt et al., 2008). Furthermore, transgenic animals overexpressing the mutant human amyloid precursor protein (hAPP-J20 mouse model) exhibit elevated levels of enkephalin in the HPC (Diez et al., 2003; Diez et al., 2000). Likewise, it has been suggested that  $\kappa$  antagonists prevent neurodegeneration (Leung, 2013), and that the selective  $\delta$  opioid receptor antagonist, naltridole, attenuates the cognitive deficit in mouse models of AD (A $\beta$ PP/PS1) (Zhang et al., 2012b). However, clinical studies using the non-specific opioid antagonist naltrexone have showed no significant clinical improvement in AD patients (Henderson et al., 1989; Hyman et al., 1985). Therefore, drugs with higher selectivity for opioid receptors might be required to reduce memory impairment in AD.

In addition to subtype-specific opioid receptor modulation, brain-specific aminopeptidases that hydrolyze endogenous opioid peptides (i.e. enkephalinase) could provide neuroprotective effect in AD (Hui, 2007). In a recent study, endomorphin-1 was shown to block A $\beta$  aggregation *in vitro* and reduce impairment in episodic memory induced by A $\beta$ 42 in mice. Intriguingly, this effect was independent of the  $\mu$  opioid receptor (Zhang et al., 2015b). Overall, these studies suggest that endogenous opioid peptides, as well as opioid receptor antagonists, might be effective for treating some aspects of memory decline and preventing further neurodegeneration in AD.

## 6. Conclusions

Acute and chronic stress exert opposite effects on episodic, emotional, and stimulus-response memories. In general, acute stress impairs episodic, HPC-dependent memories, but enhances emotional, AMYG-dependent memories. Chronic stress, on the other hand, facilitates retrieval of rigid, stimulus-response memories, which are associated with striatal function. These effects reflect the differential susceptibility of brain structures such as the HPC, AMYG, and PFC to stress. Here, we described evidence indicating that both beneficial and deleterious effects of stress on different stages of memory are controlled by activation of the opioid system in the HPC and AMYG. Furthermore, we reported that the opioid system modulates the levels of stress hormones, which in turn have an impact on memory function.

Although it is still not clear which factors determine individual susceptibility to neuropsychiatric disorders induced by stress, the evidence points towards an important role of endogenous opioids in the limbic system as a critical neural substrate in the pathophysiology of AD and PTSD. Preclinical findings indicate that drugs with high selectivity for enkephalin ( $\mu$  and  $\delta$ ) and dynorphin/ $\kappa$  receptors, might alleviate memory impairment in AD and HPC-related memory disorders. Likewise, we highlighted the potential therapeutic actions of combined  $\mu$ /ORL agonists and non-specific opioid antagonists in PTSD. However,

considering a possible downregulation of opioid receptors in chronic disorders where opioid peptides are released at sustained high levels, opioid modulators must be differentially used under acute, subacute and chronic stress conditions. Finally, it is important to clarify the molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying the critical modulatory role of the opioid system in stress-related memory disorders and to recognize its therapeutic and neuroprotective potential for the treatment of AD and PTSD, as well as related nervous system disorders.

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