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# Suppression of obsession-like thoughts in nonclinical individuals: impact on thought frequency, appraisal and mood state

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## Abstract

Wegner's (1994, *Psychological Review*, 101, 34–52) research on the paradoxical effect of thought suppression has been incorporated into contemporary cognitive-behavioural models of obsessive-compulsive disorder. However, findings on the effects of thought suppression on thought frequency have been inconsistent and few studies have actually examined the suppression of thoughts that are obsessional in nature. In the present study 219 nonclinical participants were randomly assigned to suppress or not suppress a neutral, obsessional or positive thought during an initial monitoring interval. In a second thought monitoring interval, all participants received instructions not to suppress their target thought. No paradoxical effect of suppression on frequency was observed for any type of thought, although suppression of obsessional thoughts was associated with greater subsequent discomfort and a more negative mood state than suppression of positive or neutral target thoughts. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Thought suppression; Obsessional thoughts; Intrusive thoughts

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## 1. Introduction

Wegner, Schneider, Carter and White's (1987) investigation of the ironic effects of deliberate thought suppression has had a significant impact on cognitive-behavioural models of disorders characterized by the persistent recurrence of unwanted thoughts. Wegner et al. (1987) found that participants instructed to suppress thoughts about "white bears" had more frequent thought occur-

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rences in a later thought expression interval compared to participants who expressed white bear thoughts prior to suppressing them. Other studies have found a close link between suppression and mood, such that negative thoughts are more difficult to suppress when mood is negative (e.g., Wenzlaff, Wegner & Roper, 1988; Wenzlaff, Wegner & Klein, 1991). Wegner and his colleagues proposed that this “rebound” effect of suppression results from the association of the “to-be-suppressed” material with internal and external distracters used to facilitate suppression which become cues for the previously suppressed material during and after suppression efforts have ceased.

One obvious application of this research is to the understanding obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which is characterized by the persistent recurrence of unwanted thoughts that are actively resisted. Leading cognitive-behavioural theories of OCD indeed implicate thought suppression as an important factor in thought persistence. Salkovskis (1985, 1989, 1996, 1998) argued that obsessional thoughts give rise to wilful suppression efforts because they activate a highly aversive sense that one has become, or may become, responsible for harm to oneself or others. However, such attempts are bound to fail, as per Wegner’s model. Furthermore the persistence of thoughts will have a negative impact on mood, which in turn will make the negative obsessional thoughts more accessible, and will prime negative appraisal of the thoughts. Rachman (1997, 1998) argued that obsessional thoughts escalate because they are interpreted as having catastrophic personal significance. Interpretations of significance lead to greater efforts to control the obsession but such efforts will backfire (again, as per Wegner), resulting in an increase in frequency and negative mood. Negative mood will in turn enhance the negative interpretation of the thought, thereby increasing control efforts. Clark and Purdon (Clark, 1989; Clark & Purdon, 1993; Purdon & Clark, 1999) have elaborated on these ideas, suggesting that individuals vulnerable to developing obsessional problems may believe that obsessional thoughts are evidence that undesirable personality characteristics exist and that their thoughts can and should be controlled. Failures in thought control are thus experienced as devastating and lead to a more negative mood state which in turn further reduces thought controllability.

Thought suppression, then, has been given a central place in cognitive-behavioural models of OCD. However, empirical support for the role of suppression in the persistence of thoughts has been mixed, with some studies replicating Wegner’s delayed “rebound” effect, other studies finding an immediate effect of suppression, and other studies finding no effect of suppression on thought frequency at all [see Purdon (1999) and Purdon & Clark (2000) for a comprehensive review]. Furthermore, although the thought suppression paradox has its most obvious application to OCD, very few studies have actually examined the suppression of thoughts that are obsessional in nature. The relationship between obsessionalism and suppression of nonobsessional thoughts has been studied (e.g., Smári, Sigurjónsdóttir & Sæmundsdóttir, 1994), but as Salkovskis (1996) has convincingly argued, obsessional problems are not associated with general deficits, but rather with difficulties associated with one or two thoughts in particular. Thus, our understanding of the role of suppression in OCD is likely best advanced by studies of the suppression of obsessional thoughts exclusively.

Several studies have examined the suppression of obsessional thoughts, but again, findings have been mixed. For example, Smári, Birgisdóttir and Brynjólfsdóttir (1995) observed no paradoxical effect of suppression on thought frequency, although there was some indication that participants higher in obsessional symptomatology had more target thoughts during suppression. Kelly and

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