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On becoming neutral: effects of experimental neutralizing reconsidered

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Abstract

Behaviour Research and Therapy 34 (1996) 889–898 found that writing out a negative thought produced anxiety and an urge to neutralize the thought, that instructing participants to neutralize the thought reduced anxiety/neutralization urge in the short run (i.e. within 2 min), but that in the control group 20 min without instruction was attended by the same reduction in anxiety/urge to neutralize (“natural decay”). The observations were made with participants who scored high on “thought action fusion” and the experiment was set up as experimental model of obsessions. We repeated the study with participants that were not selected on thought action fusion. All the findings reported by Behaviour Research and Therapy 34 (1996) 889–898 were replicated. Correlational analysis indicated that the strength of the effect was not related to scores on scales measuring “thought action fusion”. Behaviour Research and Therapy 34 (1996) 889–898 did not assess whether non-neutralizing was followed by immediate reductions in distress. We did assess this and found that the larger part of the immediate reduction of distress after neutralization also occurs when no neutralization instruction is given. The effects of neutralization instructions in the present type of experiment are considerably less powerful than suggested earlier. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In order to better understand why Obsessive–Compulsive Disease (OCD) patients are so upset about negative intrusions and why they tend to try and neutralize them, Rachman and co-workers related intrusions and neutralization to “thought action fusion” (TAF) (Rachman, 1993). People

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with high TAF are “inclined to feel that their unacceptable thoughts may increase the probability of an adverse event occurring (TAF Likelihood) and/or that such thoughts are morally equivalent to carrying out the corresponding unacceptable action (TAF Morality)” (Rachman, Shafran, Mitchell, Trant, & Teachman, 1996, p. 890). To the degree that TAF is present, one would feel responsible for unpleasant thoughts about mishappenings. OCD patients score especially high on TAF and this would help to explain why, relative to non-OCD participants, the former are so upset about having negative intrusions (Rachman & DeSilva, 1978; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984) and why they are so much inclined to try and neutralize negative intrusions.

Neutralization of negative thoughts is held to be functionally equivalent to carrying out overt compulsions. Both are held to reduce distress in the short run. But in the longer run *not* overtly undoing and not covertly neutralizing may both just as well be attended by anxiety reduction. As for compulsions, there is indeed data showing that anxiety goes down immediately after overtly undoing and that it goes down in the longer run without overtly undoing (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980). But what about covert neutralizing? Does immediate emotional relief attend neutralizing likewise, while non-neutralizing is, in a long(er) run, attended by a comparable decay?

Rachman et al. (1996) set out to answer this question. First a group of 63 high TAF students was recruited. They were asked to write down the sentence “I hope that X is in a car accident” where X related to a friend or relative who was close to the participant. After writing out this sentence, anxiety and urge to neutralize was measured. On a Visual Analog Scale (VAS), anxiety was much higher than right before writing out the sentence (scores went up from around 15 to around 65). These high TAF participants expressed a strong subjective urge to neutralize. Then the group was split. Half were invited to neutralize, e.g. by altering the sentence by adding “not” or destroying the paper on which the sentence was written. After 2 min of neutralizing, subjective anxiety and urge to neutralize was measured again in this subgroup. Scores dropped dramatically to around 25. The other group was asked to do nothing and after 20 min they too were asked to indicate their level of anxiety and urge to neutralize. Both dropped in the 20 min period; anxiety dropped to the same degree as 2 min neutralizing, while the drop in neutralizing urge was somewhat less in the non-neutralizing group. Rachman et al. conclude that, in high TAF participants, formulating a negative thought produces distress and an urge to neutralize, that a neutralizing ritual immediately reduces distress and urge to neutralize but that non-neutralizing will allow for a “natural decay” of distress and neutralizing urge.

The Rachman et al. (1996) study was an attempt to experimentally reproduce crucial elements of obsessive neutralizing. Because of the theoretical importance of this endeavor and its intriguing outcome, a first goal of the present experiment was to see whether the main findings could be replicated.

In order to “maximize the effects of an experimental manipulation of neutralizing” (p. 90) Rachman et al. (1996) only tested high TAF participants. It remains unclear whether the observed effects of writing out and neutralizing upsetting thoughts are specific to this group or whether the effects occur regardless of individual differences. Therefore, a second goal of the present experiment was to document whether or not the pattern found in the Rachman et al. data is specific to persons with “high TAF”.

Rachman et al. (1996) maintained that ritually neutralizing, just like washing rituals in the case of compulsive cleaners (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980), reduces distress in the short run but that in the longer run “natural decay” (Rachman et al., p. 896) also allows for reduction in distress.

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