



Effects of Active and Passive Rumination and Distraction: A Pilot Replication With Anxious Mood

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Abstract — This study examined the degree to which the response theory of depression generalized to anxious mood. The effects of active and passive rumination and distraction were evaluated in undergraduate students who underwent anxious mood induction. Experimental procedures were comparable to those used by Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues for depressed mood. Anxious, sad, and angry moods were elevated by the anxiety induction procedure. As hypothesized, visual analog scales and affective checklists for anxiety and negative mood overall were lessened more by distraction than rumination. The results suggest that rumination prolongs negative affect. Active versus passive conditions did not influence mood.

In a series of laboratory and naturalistic studies, Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues (Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993) have shown that a ruminative, as opposed to a distractive, response to depressed mood prolongs or amplifies depressed mood. Ruminative responses to depression are defined as behaviors or thoughts that focus one's attention on depressive symptoms and the implications or consequences of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). In contrast, distracting responses are defined as diversion of attention away from symptoms of depression onto pleasant or neutral thoughts and actions (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993).

Ruminative responses are conceptualized as excessive self-focused attention. The mechanism by which self-focusing of attention contributes to the

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progression from states of mild/moderate depression to more chronic depression is not clear. Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) draws from mood-congruency literature (Bower, 1981; Teasdale, 1985) to suggest that thinking about depressive symptoms while experiencing depressed mood may lead to more negative interpretations and outcome expectancies and/or interfere with effective problem solving and decision making. Furthermore, Morrow and Nolen-Hoeksema (1990) hypothesized that activity increases positive outcomes and reinforcements and distracts from negative mood, in contrast to passivity, which is likely to facilitate rumination. In support, they found that level of activity (operationalized as physical and cognitive effort) influenced depressed mood, although the effects were not as significant as those obtained from the comparison between rumination and distraction.

Morrow and Nolen-Hoeksema (1990) hypothesized that the tendency for rumination to prolong depressed mood generalizes to other mood states. In support, anxious mood has been shown to intensify as a function of negatively self-focused (i.e., ruminative) cognitions during performance of anxiety-provoking tasks (e.g., Sarason, 1975). Also, Scheier, Carver, and Gibbons (1981) found that self-directed attention induced via the presence of a mirror intensified anxiety among snake-fearful individuals during approach to their phobic stimulus. Similarly, Barlow (1988) proposed that self-directed attention to the affective qualities of distress plays a significant role in the maintenance of anxiety.

We hypothesized that rumination and passivity as conceptualized and operationalized by Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues would have the same effects on anxious mood as found with depressed mood. We replicated procedures and analytical strategies used in a study of induced depressed mood in an analogue sample (Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990) and in a comparison of depressed and nondepressed samples (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993), except for the replacement of depressed mood with anxious mood. Specifically, we hypothesized that rumination would prolong an induced anxious mood more than distraction; moreover, that passive tasks would prolong anxious mood more so than active tasks.

METHOD

Design

The study design was a 2 (Distraction vs. Rumination) \times 2 (Activity vs. Passivity) \times 3 (Baseline vs. Postinduction vs. Posttask) mixed design. Subjects were assessed on three occasions: baseline, after anxious mood induction (postinduction), and after completion of active and passive rumination and distraction response tasks (posttask).

Subjects

Subjects were 44 undergraduate psychology students, ranging from 18 to 21 years of age, who received course credit for their participation in the one-hour study. Thirty subjects were female, and 14 were male. Ethnicity was as fol-

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