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Appraisals and strategies associated with rumination and worry [☆]

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Abstract

Rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) and worry (Borkovec, Ray, & Stober, 1998) are forms of recurrent negative thinking that are implicated in the maintenance of, respectively, depression and generalized anxiety disorder. However, despite their clinical significance, the mechanisms underlying rumination and worry are not well understood. This study aimed to test recent suggestions that particular appraisals and strategies in response to intrusive thoughts may be associated with increased tendency to ruminate and worry. 148 volunteers reported appraisals and strategies to worry and rumination-related intrusions (as measured with the Cognitive Intrusion Questionnaire) and the tendency to ruminate and tendency to worry, as measured by the Response Styles Questionnaire and the Penn State Worry Questionnaire, respectively. Increased tendency to ruminate was associated with a greater need to understand a situation, increased personal importance of the situation and the strategies of analysing a situation and dwelling on the causes and meanings of situations. Increased tendency to worry was associated with greater disapproval of worry-related intrusions, and with the strategy of replacing a worrisome intrusion with another unpleasant thought. These correlational findings are consistent with meta-cognitive (Watkins & Baracaia, 2001) and goal-discrepancy accounts (Martin & Tesser, 1996) of rumination, and with a cognitive avoidance account of worry (Borkovec et al., 1998).

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1. Introduction

Rumination, that is, repetitive and recurrent self-focused thinking about failure and depressed mood (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Teasdale, 1999), has been increasingly recognised as an important component of depression. Longitudinal studies indicate that rumination can predict the onset (Just & Alloy, 1997; Spasojevic & Alloy, 2001) and maintenance of major depression (Kuehner & Weber, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000, although not replicated by Lara, Klein, & Kasch, 2000). Relative to distraction, for participants in a dysphoric mood, rumination exacerbates depressed mood (Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993) and negative thinking (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995).

Worry, another form of recurrent negative thinking, is a central and defining characteristic of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (APA, 1994). Worry has been defined as “a chain of thoughts and images, negatively affect-laden and relatively uncontrollable” (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983), typically focused on possible negative consequences (“What if this happened?”).

Despite the clinical importance of worry and rumination, the mechanisms of worry and rumination are not well understood. In particular, there is the question of why some people ruminate or worry more frequently and for longer than other people. After all, everyone worries and ruminates some of the time, particularly when faced with difficult situations. However, not everyone dwells on upsetting thoughts in an excessive, uncontrollable or chronic way. What makes some people more prone to rumination or worry?

An important difference between normal and pathological thinking may be the response to intrusive thoughts. For both worry and rumination, the sequence of recurrent thinking on a negative theme is often initiated by intrusive thoughts that come unbidden into peoples' minds (Langlois, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 2000a, 2000b; Martin & Tesser, 1996). However, intrusive thoughts are a common and normal phenomenon (e.g. Rachman & de Silva, 1978; Wells & Morrison, 1994), such that the occurrence of an intrusive thought cannot solely account for pathological worry or pathological rumination. Rather, it has been suggested that particular appraisals and strategies in response to intrusions will lead to recurrent negative thinking such as worry and rumination (Langlois et al., 2000a; Wells, 1995). Thus, worry, in the form of a sequence of elaborated verbal thoughts, may be initiated in response to intrusive catastrophic images as a form of cognitive avoidance (Borkovec et al., 1998). Likewise, rumination has been proposed to be a persistent mental attempt at resolving unattained goals, which is initiated by an intrusive concern indicating a discrepancy between current state and ideal outcome (Martin & Tesser, 1996).

However, the relationship between appraisals and strategies in response to particular intrusive thoughts and the overall tendency to ruminate or to worry has not been directly examined. The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between appraisals and strategies to specific intrusions and tendency towards rumination (using Response Styles Questionnaire, RSQ, Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993) and tendency to worry (using Penn State Worry Questionnaire, PSWQ, Meyer, Miller, Metzger, & Borkovec, 1990).

The study first examined the relationship between appraisals/strategies, worry and rumination by looking at the correlations between tendency to ruminate, tendency to worry and specific items reflecting appraisals and strategies in response to intrusions. Furthermore, because this approach

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