



The effects of self-focused rumination on global negative self-judgements in depression

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Abstract

Previous research in dysphoric participants has found that compared with distraction, rumination inductions are associated with increased levels of cognitive distortions and overgeneral autobiographical memories. Watkins and Teasdale ((2001) *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 110, 353–357) investigated which component of rumination was responsible for this effect in overgeneral memory, and found two distinct modes of ruminative self-focus, with analytical, evaluative self-focus maintaining overgeneral memory, whereas self-focus low in analytical thinking reduced overgeneral memory. The present study compared the effects of these two distinct forms of self-focused rumination with another measure of overgeneral thinking—global negative self-judgements. Thirty depressed participants and thirty never-depressed participants were randomly allocated to ‘analytic’ (high analysis) or ‘experiential’ (low analysis) self-focused manipulations. As predicted, in depressed participants, the analytical self-focus condition increased ratings of the self as worthless and incompetent pre- to post-manipulation, whereas the experiential self-focus condition resulted in no significant change in such judgements. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that an analytical mode of self-focused rumination may be particularly maladaptive in depression.

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Introduction

Increasing evidence suggests that rumination plays a role in the maintenance of depression (e.g. Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Experimental studies have found that in dysphoric participants, compared to distraction, rumination increases depressed mood, cognitive distortions and overgeneral autobiographical memories, and impairs problem-solving skills (e.g. Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Watkins, Teasdale, & Williams, 2000).

More recent evidence suggests that there may be a number of distinct modes of self-focused attention within ruminative self-focus, each of which has distinct functional properties (e.g. McFarland & Buehler, 1998; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Teasdale (1999) hypothesised that analytical self-focus, defined as thinking analytically “about” oneself and one’s symptoms, and experiential self-focus, defined as focusing on the direct experience of one’s thoughts, feelings and sensations in the present moment, are functionally distinct forms of self-attention, with the former maladaptive and the latter adaptive in depression. Consistent with this hypothesis, Watkins and Teasdale (2001, 2004) found in depressed patients that analytical self-focus maintains overgeneral memory, whilst experiential self-focus reduces overgeneral memory. The degree of overgeneral memory (i.e., recall of categoric memories summarising repeated events such as “I am always making mistakes”) provides an index of whether each thinking style is adaptive, since it is elevated in depressed patients and predicts the course of depressive symptoms, independent of the initial level of depression (e.g. Brittlebank, Scott, Williams, & Ferrier, 1993; Mackinger, Loschin, & Leibetseder, 2000).

The categoric nature of overgeneral memory overlaps with other forms of overgeneral thinking found in depression such as global negative self-judgements (e.g. I am unlovable) and overgeneralisations (e.g. “Because I felt uncomfortable at that meeting, I’m no good at this job”), which also predict future depressive symptoms (Carver, 1988; Dent & Teasdale, 1988). Categoric memories can contribute to overgeneralisations and global judgements when they involve self-evaluations (e.g. “always making mistakes”), although categoric memories are distinct from these phenomena, as some memories do not involve self-evaluations (e.g. “playing football every Sunday”). Given these similarities and theoretical links between overgeneral thinking and rumination (e.g. Teasdale, 1999; Wood & Dodgson, 1996), we hypothesised that other types of overgeneral thinking would also be differentially affected by experiential versus analytical self-focus.

Thus, the aim of the present study was to investigate whether the mode of processing during self-focus influences global negative self-judgements. Consistent with Teasdale’s (1999) hypothesis that in depression analytical self-focus is maladaptive, whilst experiential self-focus is adaptive, we predicted that inducing depressed participants to think in an analytical and evaluative way about their symptoms would produce more negative global self-judgements than inducing them to experience their symptoms in a non-analytical way. As previous studies have found that these manipulations only have differential effects in vulnerable groups (Watkins & Teasdale, 2004), we expected no differential effect of processing style on overgeneral thinking in non-depressed participants.

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