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The predictors of thought suppression in young and old adults: Effects of rumination, anxiety, and other variables

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Abstract

The tendency to use thought suppression in everyday life as assessed by the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI) has been related to several psychopathological and personality factors. However, previous research has primarily investigated a limited set of psychopathological factors and their relation to the use of thought suppression in younger adults only. Virtually nothing is known about the relation between thought suppression and psychopathology in older adults. The present study examined a wide variety of variables that have been theoretically and empirically linked to thought suppression and used regression models to predict the tendency to suppress thoughts in everyday life, in both younger (mean age 20) and older (mean age 73) adult samples. Results demonstrated that in both samples, the use of thought suppression was best predicted by rumination and trait anxiety. In addition, young participants had significantly higher WBSI scores than older adults but this age difference disappeared when controlling for low levels of anxiety and rumination in older adults.

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1. Introduction

Most people have at times experienced disturbing or potentially distressing thoughts. One popular method by which people attempt to control these (and other) thoughts is by trying to suppress them (Wegner, 1994). However, there is ample evidence showing that thought suppression can be counter productive and produce paradoxical effects. Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) were the first to demonstrate experimentally that prior thought suppression can lead to later preoccupation with the very same thought – a phenomenon they called the “rebound effect”. Despite numerous demonstrations of the rebound effect in the laboratory (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000), thought suppression continues to be used in everyday life by many people. For example, in an informal survey conducted by Erdelyi and Goldberg (1978), 99% of college students reported having tried to exclude disturbing thoughts from consciousness in an effort to avoid the associated discomfort.

One widely used index of the tendency to use thought suppression in everyday life is the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI) developed by Wegner and Zanakos (1994). This 15-item questionnaire had a test–retest reliability of .69 over a 3-month period leading Wegner and Zanakos (1994) to suggest that the scale measures a stable, trait-like individual difference in one’s propensity to use thought suppression. Muris, Merckelbach, and Horselenberg (1996) also examined the test–retest reliability of the WBSI and found it to be .80 over a 12-week period. Furthermore, both of these studies reported a one-factor solution when the WBSI was factor analysed (but see Blumberg, 2000, and Rassin, 2003, who report three- and two-factor solutions, respectively).

An important theoretical question concerns the consequences of one’s tendency to use thought suppression. The results of several correlational studies suggest that a disposition to suppress thoughts in everyday life is linked to various forms of psychopathology. For example, several studies have shown that the WBSI correlates positively and significantly with depression and trait anxiety in both undergraduate and clinical samples (Muris et al., 1996; Spinhoven & Van der Does, 1999; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994).

Wegner and his colleagues (Erber & Wegner, 1996; Wegner, 1994; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) have repeatedly suggested that thought suppression itself leads to greater levels of psychopathology (see also Purdon, 1999). In contrast, other researchers have argued that pre-existing psychopathological tendencies cause one to begin to use thought suppression to avoid discomfort. For example, according to Martin and Tesser (1996) it is rumination and other linked psychopathologies that “cause” one to use thought suppression. Rumination has been defined as a type of conscious thought which revolves around one theme and is recurrent, often for extended periods of time (Martin & Tesser, 1996). Martin and Tesser suggest that rumination occurs due to a person not being able to approach or achieve goals that they have set for themselves. Under this formulation thought suppression is viewed as a consequence of rumination due to the fact that rumination can often be aversive and interfere with other tasks. As a result, thought suppression is instigated in an effort to prevent further ruminations. However, Erber and Wegner (1996) argue that rumination is a result of prior thought suppression and that the rebound effect itself may be viewed as a form of rumination. Therefore, to date, rumination has been theoretically linked with thought suppression but, to our knowledge, this link has not been tested empirically (Erber & Wegner, 1996; Martin & Tesser, 1996).

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