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Unsuccessful suppression is associated with increased neuroticism, intrusive thoughts, and rumination



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ABSTRACT

Studies of thought suppression, the reduction in accessibility for intentionally unrehearsed and actively avoided thoughts, vary dramatically in the level of suppression reported. The purpose of our research was to explore individual differences associated with self-reports of the success, failure, or avoidance of thought suppression in everyday life. Participants completed a survey measuring intrusive thoughts, neuroticism, rumination, and autobiographical knowledge of suppression tendencies and capabilities. Individuals who reported *successful* suppression were less neurotic, ruminative, and experienced less thought intrusion than individuals who reported *unsuccessful* suppression attempts. Our findings suggest that the high-ends of the neuroticism and intrusive thought spectrums are occupied by individuals who unsuccessfully attempt to suppress undesirable information, while successful suppressors differ minimally from non-suppressors.

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1. Introduction

The ability to actively avoid thinking about unpleasant or otherwise undesirable information is a skill that varies between individuals; whether the information is a traumatic experience or an annoying altercation in traffic, it is often important to a task at hand to suppress unwanted information. In the present study we examined the relationship between self-reports of the use and success of thought suppression and personality traits which have been associated in previous work (Levy & Anderson, 2008; Munoz, Sliwinski, Smyth, Almeida, & King, 2013) with thought suppression. The executive deficit hypothesis (Levy & Anderson, 2008) predicts that successful suppression is contingent on executive control. This hypothesis is supported in literature examining neuroimaging (Anderson et al., 2004), aging (Anderson, Reinholz, Kuhl, & Mayr, 2011), and intrusive thoughts (Hasher, Zacks, & May, 1999).

Neuroticism is intimately related to both executive functioning and intrusive thoughts (Munoz et al., 2013). Munoz and colleagues found neuroticism to be positively correlated with experiences of intrusive thoughts, and both neuroticism and intrusive thoughts to be negatively correlated to working memory performance.

Klein and Boals (2001) found life stress to impair working memory capacity (Experiment 1, 2). Suls and Martin (2005) describe a *neurotic cascade*; individuals high in neuroticism are motivated to engage in thought suppression, even though their attempts at suppression may prove unsuccessful, as described above. Emotionally negative information may be better suppressed than emotionally positive information (e.g., Lambert, Good, & Kirk, 2010; Noreen & MacLeod, 2013). According to the *Neurotic Cascade*, highly neurotic individuals appraise events as more harmful or threatening, and negative affect from stressful experiences may carry over to adjacent experiences or thoughts which may not be negative *per se*. This predilection to experience emotionally negative events leads highly neurotic individuals to allocate more attention to events perceived as negative, and to remember those events in more detail (see Rusting, 1998). This overly negative outlook tends to be comorbid with *rumination*; brooding and focusing on one's negative mood or experiences (Muris, Roelofs, Rassin, Franken, & Mayer, 2005; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Wenzlaff & Luxton, 2003; Yoon, Maltby, & Joormann, 2013). Attending and ruminating on emotionally negative events along with a reduced capacity for suppression certainly leaves highly neurotic individuals at a disadvantage in terms of the potential for intrusive, unwanted thoughts.

As this brief review has illustrated, research carried out to-date has examined a range of individual differences associated with suppression and thought intrusion. However, a critical question has yet to be addressed: Do individuals who engage habitually in

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thought suppression and experience this cognitive strategy as successful differ from those who engage in the same strategy but experience their attempts at suppressing unwanted thoughts as unsuccessful? The purpose of the present study is to determine if personality traits associated with suppression reliably vary between groups that report different levels of suppressive success. A survey method was used to address this question because our comparison of personality attributes between groups who reported success and failure, with regard to thought suppression, required a relatively large sample size.

Thus, while previous work has shown that high neuroticism is associated with increased frequency of intrusive thoughts (Munoz et al., 2013), in the current study we employed a novel measure to differentiate participants who believe they have not engaged in suppression (i.e., non-suppressors) from those who report having engaged in suppression either successfully (i.e., successful suppressors) or unsuccessfully (i.e., unsuccessful suppressors). We examine the differences between non-suppressors, successful suppressors, and unsuccessful suppressors on measures of neuroticism, rumination, and the experience of intrusive thoughts. Our measure, termed the Retrospective and Prospective Suppression Inventory (RPSI) differentiates between non-suppressors, successful suppressors, and unsuccessful suppressors in both a retrospective and prospective sense; whether the individual has engaged in suppression previously, and will they engage in suppression in future instances of undesirable thoughts.

We hypothesise that trait neuroticism will be, as previously observed, positively correlated to the experience of intrusive thoughts (Munoz et al., 2013) and rumination (Muris et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2013). We predict that individuals who report utilising suppression will have higher levels of trait neuroticism, intrusive thought prevalence, and rumination than individuals who do not report utilising suppression. Further, we predict that trait neuroticism, intrusive thought prevalence, and rumination will vary between non-suppressors, successful suppressors, and unsuccessful suppressors. Specifically, we predict unsuccessful suppressors to have higher levels of trait neuroticism and intrusive thought experiences than both non-suppressors and successful suppressors. That is, unsuccessful suppressors are predicted to possess traits associated with decreased executive function. These predictions are based on participants reported past suppressive activity, rather than speculative future suppressive attempts. Lastly, robust differences between genders have been previously observed for neuroticism (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001), intrusive thoughts (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994), and rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001); females tend to score higher than males on all three measures. Supplementary analyses will determine if differences observed between RPSI groups are subject to gender differences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Two hundred sixty-eight adults (207 female, 54 male, 7 undisclosed; mean age = 22.79) were recruited through an advertisement posted on the University of Auckland School of Psychology website, which contained a secure link to the digital survey.

2.2. Measures

The survey package was accessed digitally, and the surveys were presented in a fixed order. After completing a digital consent form, participants could access the body of the survey.

2.2.1. Suppressive behaviours

To assess participant suppressive tendencies, we devised the Retrospective–Prospective Suppression Inventory (RPSI). The RPSI consists of five questions, regarding firstly past suppressive tendencies (“In the past, when you have had experiences you wish to forget, did you consciously try to forget the experience?”) and the efficacy of the suppression (“Were your efforts to forget the memory successful?”), secondly expected future suppressive tendencies (“In the future, if you experience something highly unpleasant, would you consciously try to forget the experience?”) and supposed efficacy of the suppression (“Do you think you would be able to successfully forget about the unpleasant experience?”), and lastly the general attitude towards the acceptability of suppression in dealing with undesirable information (“In your opinion, is trying to forget an unpleasant or undesirable experience a reasonable way to come to terms with an unchangeable event?”).

2.2.2. Intrusive thoughts

The White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) is a 15-item scale designed to measure the general experience of intrusive thoughts. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and pertains to incidence of intrusive thoughts and suppression (e.g., “I wish I could stop thinking of certain things”). See Wegner and Zanakos (1994) for further details and scoring.

2.2.3. Neuroticism

Participants completed the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R; Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985). The 48-item inventory provides personality data across four dimensions; neuroticism, extraversion, psychoticism, and social desirability (i.e., the lie subscale). Each item on the scale is a question to which participants respond in the affirmative or the negative, depending on if the item applies to them (e.g., “Are you an irritable person?”). Twelve items of the EPQ-R belong to the neuroticism subscale (i.e., EPQ-N). Though the neuroticism subscale is the only EPQ-R subscale of interest in the present study, participants completed the entire scale to prevent response bias.

2.2.4. Rumination

The Ruminative Response Scale (RRS; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) provides an index of how frequently individuals engage in mentation dwelling on negative thoughts. Items inquire to the prevalence of specific thoughts or behaviours (e.g., “[How often do you] think about all your shortcomings, failures, faults, mistakes?”) and are rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from “almost never” to “almost always”.

3. Results

All questions on the RPSI included the option to not provide a response. As such, the group sizes in the following analyses vary accordingly.

3.1. Personality inventory correlations

Bivariate correlations were calculated between experiences of intrusive thoughts and rumination, and neuroticism scores. Neuroticism was highly associated with intrusive thoughts ($r = .535$, $p < .001$) and rumination ($r = .622$, $p < .001$). Intrusive thoughts were also highly correlated with rumination ($r = .640$, $p < .001$). These results confirm that the presently measured sample conforms to previously established trends (Munoz et al., 2013; Muris et al., 2005; Wenzlaff & Luxton, 2003; Yoon et al., 2013).

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