



THOUGHT SUPPRESSION: AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION OF SPIDER PHOBICS

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Summary—Researchers have observed that attempts to suppress a thought cause either an immediate increase in the occurrence of the thought (i.e. immediate enhancement effect) or a delayed increase in the occurrence of the thought (i.e. rebound effect). In this study, we examined whether suppression of a personally-relevant, emotional thought item (i.e. a spider to spider phobics) results in an immediate enhancement or a rebound effect. Forty-eight spider phobics were randomly assigned to either a suppression group or a control group. Subjects spent three 5-min periods alone monitoring their thoughts. During the first period, subjects in both groups were instructed to 'think about anything'. During the second period, subjects in the suppression group were instructed 'not to think of a spider', whereas subjects in the control group were instructed to 'think about anything'. During the third period, subjects in both groups were instructed to 'think about anything'. The number of spider-related thoughts was recorded for each period. Results from the second period failed to support an immediate enhancement effect. Evidence for a rebound effect, however, was obtained in the third period. The theoretical and clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

Unwanted, distressing thoughts are a common symptom of several clinical disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and phobias. Given the aversive nature of these thoughts, individuals often try to suppress them. Despite their efforts, however, they frequently continue to experience such thoughts.

Several researchers have begun to systematically investigate the effects of thought suppression (e.g. Clark, Ball & Pape, 1991; Clark, Winton & Thynn, 1993; Lavy & van den Hout, 1990; Merckelbach, Muris, van den Hout & de Jong, 1991; Muris, Merckelbach, van den Hout & de Jong, 1992; Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994; Wegner, Scheider, Carter & White, 1987). In one of the first laboratory-based experiments, Wegner *et al.* (1987, Experiment one) asked subjects to verbalize their stream of consciousness under one of two conditions—an initial suppression condition (i.e. initial suppression followed by expression instructions) or an initial expression condition (i.e. initial expression followed by suppression instructions). *Ss* who were randomly assigned to the initial suppression group were first asked to 'try not to think of a white bear' during a 5 min suppression condition, and then to 'try to think of a white bear' during a 5 min expression condition. *Ss* assigned to the initial expression group were given these instructions in the reverse order (i.e. 'try to think of a white bear' followed by 'try not to think of a white bear'). Results revealed that *Ss* who were initially asked to try not to think of a white bear were unable to completely suppress the thought as instructed. On being asked after this suppression task to think about the white bear, these *Ss* showed significantly more thoughts or 'intrusions' about the bear (*rebound effect*) than did *Ss* who were asked to think about a white bear from the outset. Clark *et al.* (1991), using a similar paradigm, found that attempts to suppress thoughts of another neutral, nonemotional item (i.e. 'green rabbit'), also lead to subsequent intrusions. Wegner *et al.* (1987) have suggested that the rebound phenomenon may serve as a valid laboratory model for understanding the occurrence of clinical obsessions, and may explain the persistence of such unwanted thoughts.

Lavy and van den Hout (1990) also investigated the effects of thought suppression. They randomly assigned *Ss* to one of two groups: a thought suppression group or a control group. *Ss* in the thought suppression group were instructed to 'try not to think of vehicles', whereas *Ss* in the control group were 'free to think of whatever they wanted'. Results revealed an *immediate enhancement effect*, that is, *Ss* in the thought suppression group mentioned more thoughts about

vehicles than *Ss* in the control group. This design, however, did not permit a test of the rebound effect.

In another investigation, Muris *et al.* (1992) randomly assigned *Ss* to either a suppression group or a control group. Half of the *Ss* in each group read an emotional story, and the remaining half of the *Ss* read a neutral story. All *Ss* then spent three 5-min periods monitoring their thoughts. During the first period, *Ss* in the suppression group were instructed to 'try not to think about the story that they just read', whereas *Ss* in the control group were instructed to 'think about anything'. During the second period, *Ss* in both groups were instructed to 'think about anything'. Upon completion of this second period, all *Ss* engaged in a distraction task (i.e. looking at neutral slides) for 20 min. Finally, during the third period, *Ss* were again asked to 'think about anything'. Results revealed that *Ss* in the control condition, irrespective of the type of story, did not demonstrate a rebound effect. *Ss* in the suppression group, after reading the neutral story, evidenced an immediate enhancement effect; after reading the emotional story, they did not evidence the predicted rebound effect. Based on this latter finding, Muris *et al.* (1992) concluded that the rebound phenomenon may not represent a valid laboratory model for studying clinical obsessions as obsessions are often related to emotional themes. It should be noted that although the story was 'emotional', it was not personally-relevant to the subjects; obsessions, however, are personally-relevant to individuals who experience them (Salkovskis, 1989). Therefore, before one can accept Muris *et al.*'s conclusion, it is important to examine whether a rebound effect is observed following attempts to suppress an emotional, personally-relevant thought item.

The inconsistent findings across previous studies preclude acceptance that thought suppression plays a role in the occurrence of clinical obsessions. In this study, attention was paid to several methodological and design issues that might account for the discrepant findings. First, we added a baseline condition to ensure that subjects in both groups have equal practice monitoring their thoughts. Second, we did not use expression as the control condition as did Wegner *et al.* (1987). Use of expression as a control condition may make it difficult to detect an immediate enhancement effect as instructing subjects to intentionally think of a particular thought may produce a ceiling effect. A more appropriate and more naturalistic control condition is to simply mention the target thought without requesting that subjects either suppress or express it (Clark *et al.*, 1991). Third, care was taken to ensure that the thought-item was mentioned an equal number of times in each of the two types of instructions. Finally, we extended this research to examine the effects of thought suppression in a clinical population, using a disorder-specific stimulus.

The present study was designed to investigate whether suppression of an emotional, personally-relevant thought-item (i.e. a spider to spider phobics) results in an immediate enhancement effect or a rebound effect. *Ss* were randomly assigned to either a suppression group or a control group. First, we hypothesized that immediately following thought suppression instructions (suppression group), *Ss* would demonstrate a comparable number of spider-related thoughts to *Ss* asked to 'think about anything' (control group). That is, they would be unsuccessful at completely suppressing spider-related thoughts, and they would not evidence an immediate enhancement effect. Second, we hypothesized that following subsequent instructions to 'think about anything', *Ss* in the suppression group, but not in the control group, would evidence a rebound effect, or an increased frequency of spider-related thoughts.

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-eight students enrolled in the Introductory Psychology course at the University of Toronto participated in this study. They were recruited via announcements on the subject pool bulletin board seeking spider phobics. All *Ss* met DSM-III-R criteria (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1987) for simple phobia as determined by the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-III-R [SCID-R; Spitzer, Williams, Gibbon & First (1990)].

The suppression group consisted of 24 *Ss*. Their mean age was 21.88 years ($SD = 5.30$), and their mean years of education was 14.88 ($SD = 1.19$). The mean fear of spiders, as revealed on the Fear Thermometer (Walk, 1956) was 6.03 ($SD = 1.73$). The control group consisted of 24 *Ss*. Their mean age was 20.63 ($SD = 2.50$), and their mean years of education was 14.63 ($SD = 1.43$). The mean

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