



PII S0887-6185(97)00048-0

Don't Worry and Beware of White Bears: Thought Suppression in Anxiety Patients

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Abstract—The ability to suppress unwanted thoughts was investigated in patients with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD; $n = 29$), Speech Phobics ($n = 25$), and nonanxious controls ($n = 28$). All participants spent 5 minutes thinking aloud about anything that came to mind while trying not to think of white bears. In another task, they thought aloud for 5 minutes while trying not to think of their main worry. Intrusions of unwanted thoughts were signaled by button presses and recorded on tape. In accordance with the disorder's definition and complaints of the GAD patients, they showed more intrusions of their main worry than of white bears. The opposite was true for other participants. Compared to a baseline measure, all participant groups were unable to reduce duration of main worry thoughts when trying to suppress them. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

Preparation of this paper was supported by a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to Eni S. Becker, a fellowship from the German Research Foundation (DFG) to Mike Rinck, and the support of the Veterans Administration to Walton T. Roth.

We would like to thank Gordon H. Bower for directing our attention to the work of D. M. Wegner, Cassandra Lehmann for recruiting and diagnosing the GAD patients, Cheryl Post for her help in conducting the experiment, Andrea Hähnel for rating the think-aloud protocols, and the anonymous reviewers for making helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper.

Ulrich Glowalla, Joachim Hasebrook, and Gilbert Fezzardi supplied the software used to conduct the experiment.

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Worry is a familiar companion to many of us, and constitutes a symptom associated with many anxiety disorders, such as phobias, Panic Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Barlow, 1988; Rachman, 1982; Wells & Morrison, 1994). The phenomenon of worry has aroused considerable interest; therefore, it seems surprising that it has not been subjected to empirical study very often. One reason for this lack of research was suggested by Eysenck (1992), who pointed out that there is no generally accepted definition of the term *worry*. However, the different definitions proposed (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983; MacLeod, Williams, & Bekerian, 1991; Mathews, 1990) agree on several characteristics of worries: (a) Worries are a cognitive phenomenon experienced as aversive, people worry about future events and potential catastrophes, and worries are very hard to control. Furthermore, worries differ from similar cognitive phenomena, such as obsessions (see Turner, Beidel, & Stanley, 1992, for a review). For instance, worries are typically related to realistic experiences of everyday life, whereas the contents of obsessions frequently include topics such as contamination, religion, sex, or aggression. (b) Worries are more frequently triggered and generally occur in the form of thoughts, whereas obsessions often occur as images and impulses. (c) Finally, although both are experienced as uncontrollable, worries are not as strongly resisted as obsessions.

The last characteristic of worries, their uncontrollability, is particularly important. The anxiety disorder most closely associated with the phenomenon of worrying is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and its new definition according to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV;* American Psychiatric Association, 1994) stresses that GAD patients' worrying is uncontrollable as well as excessive. Indeed, self-reports of GAD patients indicate that they feel they have very little control over their worrying (Craske, Rapee, Jackel, & Barlow, 1989), that they worry for a longer time than nonanxious controls (60% of each day compared to 18%; Craske et al., 1989), and they worry about more topics (Vasey & Borkovec, 1992). Regarding the most common topics, GAD patients report more worries about daily hassles and their health than nonanxious controls, whereas worries about family, personal relations, and finances seem to be common in both groups (e.g., Craske et al., 1989; Shadick & Roemer, 1991). So far, these conclusions are based on self-reports only. Therefore, the present study was conducted to provide an experimental test of GAD patients' complaints about the uncontrollability of their worries. In particular, we wanted to find out whether GAD patients' mental control is indeed impaired in comparison to control participants, and whether the impairment is limited to their worries or affects unwanted thoughts in general. We compared GAD patients to nonanxious controls as well as to patients suffering from Speech Phobia to determine whether the expected impairment is indeed specific to GAD or related to anxiety disorders in general.

In order to design an experimental test of mental control, we adopted a paradigm introduced by Wegner (1989). Wegner's conception of mental control comprises two processes: concentration on thoughts that one wants to think

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