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The effect of attempted thought suppression in acute stress disorder

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Abstract

Attempted suppression of traumatic memories was investigated in survivors of motor vehicle accidents with acute stress disorder (ASD; $n = 24$) and without ASD ($n = 24$). Participants monitored their trauma-related thoughts for three 5-minute periods. In Period 1, participants were instructed to think about anything. For Period 2, participants were administered suppression or non-suppression instructions relating to thoughts of the trauma. In Period 3, participants were again instructed to think about anything. ASD participants reported higher ratings of anxiety, frequency of trauma-related thoughts, and attempted suppression of trauma-related thoughts than non-ASD participants. Participants who were given suppression instructions demonstrated a delayed increase in trauma-related thoughts in the period subsequent to suppression. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Researchers have recently employed personally relevant thoughts and clinical populations in order to ascertain the applicability of thought suppression paradigms to clinical phenomena. The attempted suppression of naturally occurring negative intrusions has been shown to result in an increase in the occurrence of the suppressed thoughts (Salkovskis and Campbell, 1994; Trinder and Salkovskis, 1994; McNally and Ricciardi, 1996). Further, a recent study comparing spider phobics and controls found that while attempted suppression was associated with an increase in spider-related thoughts, the contribution of attempted suppression to the number of spider-related thoughts was relatively minimal (Muris et al., 1997). Muris et al. (1997) concluded that attempts to suppress are not central to the maintenance of intrusions in spider phobia, but might play a role in intrusive thoughts that are characterised by more

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“ruminative preoccupation” such as those that may occur posttrauma (p. 773). This reasoning is consistent with several other commentaries that have argued that the thought suppression paradigm may have utility for understanding the maintenance of posttraumatic intrusions and avoidance (Trinder and Salkovskis, 1994; Ehlers and Steil, 1995; Gold and Wegner, 1995). To date, there has been no investigation of attempted suppression in traumatised individuals.

Accordingly, the present study represents the first investigation of the relationship between attempted suppression and intrusions in individuals diagnosed with acute stress disorder (ASD). Intrusive thoughts and cognitive avoidance are hallmark symptoms of ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The study was designed to investigate the two types of ironic effects that have been previously reported in the literature, namely, the immediate increase in the target thoughts when suppression is attempted (e.g., Lavy and van den Hout, 1990) and the delayed increase in the number of intrusive thoughts after attempted suppression has ceased (e.g., Clark et al., 1991, 1993). Considering the salience of intrusions (Rachman, 1982) and the potentially greater cognitive load associated with ASD (Wegner, 1994), it was expected that ironic effects of thought suppression would be stronger for ASD than non-ASD participants.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were successive volunteer inpatients who were admitted to a major trauma hospital after a motor vehicle accident (MVA). Diagnosis of ASD was assessed using the Acute Stress Disorder Interview (ASDI; Bryant et al., 1997). This structured clinical interview is based on DSM-IV criteria, contains 19 dichotomously scored items that relate to ASD symptoms, and provides a total score indicative of acute stress severity (ASS; range 1 to 19). The ASDI possesses sound test–retest reliability over a period of two to five days ($r = 0.95$). The ASDI also has good sensitivity (92%) and specificity (93%) compared to independent clinical diagnosis based on DSM-IV criteria. Participants were allocated to the non-ASD group on the basis of not satisfying the dissociative, reexperiencing, or avoidance symptom clusters of the ASD diagnostic criteria. Twenty four ASD participants (13 male, 11 female) and 24 non-ASD participants (18 male, 6 female) were included in the study and were randomly allocated to either a suppression or non-suppression condition. Participants were excluded if they had sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI), displayed poor English, or were using prescribed narcotic analgesia (with the exception of codeine) at the time of the study. The participants were 25 drivers, 14 passengers, 5 motor bike riders, and 4 pedestrians.

2.2. Procedure

The experimenter administered the ASDI (Bryant et al., 1997) and the Impact of Event Scale (IES; Horowitz et al., 1979). The IES is a 15-item inventory that comprises Intrusion and Avoidance scales, has been shown to correlate with PTSD, and possesses sound psychometric properties (Zilberg et al., 1982). Participants were also asked to rate their anxiety (1 = “not at all anxious”, 10 = “extremely anxious”). Participants were then given a response button to

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