



Empirical investigations of thought suppression in OCD

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Abstract

Cognitive-behavioural models of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) implicate thought suppression as a key factor in the development and persistence of the disorder. There is now more than a decade of research on thought suppression and its effects as they pertain to OCD. This paper briefly reports on initial thought suppression research and then offers a detailed review of recent thought suppression research that has directly examined the role of suppression in OCD. Theoretical and methodological issues in using thought suppression paradigms to understand OCD are discussed. It is concluded that this body of work continues to yield inconsistent findings with respect to the effects of suppression on thought frequency, although there are some consistent findings that suggest that suppression is driven by negative thought appraisal and is associated in turn with greater OCD symptomatology. Thus, there is support in this work for key tenets of cognitive-behavioural models of OCD. Suggestions for future research directions are offered.

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Leading cognitive-behavioural models of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) implicate thought suppression as a key factor in its development and persistence. Empirical investigations of the effects of thought suppression on thought frequency and other factors have thus become very relevant to understanding and treating OCD. This paper reviews recent research on thought suppression research that is directly relevant to obsessional problems and examines the validity of various experimental paradigms for understanding the effects of thought suppression on obsessional problems. Recommendations for future research are offered.

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1. Obsessional thoughts

Obsessions are thoughts that give rise to immediate resistance. Active resistance is a defining feature of obsessions in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Text Revision) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and is an important criterion for distinguishing obsessions from other kinds of persistent, negative, unwanted thoughts such as worry and depressive rumination (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980; Turner, Beidel, & Stanley, 1992; Wells & Morrison, 1994). Phenomenological reports of OCD emphasize that in many cases of OCD the significant complaint is that the subjective level of control over obsessional thoughts is inadequate, as assessed by thought frequency, intensity and duration. That is, the usual powers of exclusion and removal are weakened (e.g., Calamari & Janeck, 1998). Successful treatment is characterized by restoration of an appropriate degree of self-regulation (e.g., Rachman & Hodgson, 1980, pp. 15, 215, 265). At the same time, the person is often highly motivated not to reveal the content of their obsessions to anyone in order to avoid feeling ashamed, humiliated, rejected or feared (Newth & Rachman, 2001).

2. Cognitive-behavioural models of OCD

Cognitive-behavioural models argue that negative appraisal of the obsessional thought is the key factor in thought escalation and persistence. Salkovskis argues that thoughts give rise to active resistance when they activate overvalued beliefs that (a) thoughts can cause harm; and (b) that the individual is honour-bound to prevent harm, even if his/her responsibility for harm or to the potential victim of harm is remote, minute and uncertain (Salkovskis, 1985, 1989, 1998; Salkovskis, Richards, & Forrester, 1995; Salkovskis et al., 2000). Thus, the individual must control thoughts that signify potential harm in order to avert harm and the aversive sense that one may become responsible for harm otherwise.

Rachman proposes that active resistance to thoughts arises from beliefs that having a thought about an action that is immoral is akin, morally, to actually conducting that action ('moral thought-action fusion') and that having thoughts about an event increases the likelihood of that event happening ('likelihood thought-action fusion') (Rachman, 1997, 1998; Rachman & Hodgson, 1980). The individual attempts to control the thought because it offends her/his moral sensibilities both by its occurrence and because it may potentiate the occurrence of morally objectionable events. Clark and Purdon (Clark, 1989; Clark & Purdon, 1993; Purdon & Clark, 1999) offer an elaboration and extension of these core ideas, and suggest that beliefs about thoughts and thought processes in general also lead to active resistance. For example, individuals who believe that mental control is an important part of self-control will have a high stake in being able to control thoughts. Individuals who believe that unwanted thoughts represent a lapse in mental control and who strive for perfect control will be invested in regaining mental control after such a thought occurs.

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