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The generalizability of thought suppression ability to novel stimuli

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Abstract

The present study examined in a nonclinical sample whether ability to suppress autobiographical negative memories generalized to successful suppression of novel scenarios of negative valence (armed hold-up) or neutral valence (white bear). Fifty-nine participants were assessed for thought suppression ability, and 35 were identified as ‘good’ or ‘poor’ suppressors. Potential correlates of thought suppression ability were measured, including estimates of cognitive ability, previous traumatic experiences, and mood states. Good suppressors were more successful in not thinking of target scenarios when instructed to suppress than poor suppressors, and this was independent of valence of the to-be-suppressed scenario. Contrary to predictions, the two groups did not differ on measures hypothesized to influence suppression ability, but within group correlations indicated tentative support for mood states and prior trauma being related to autobiographical intrusions. The implications for understanding intrusive cognition in clinical disorders are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Intrusive cognition occurs in a wide range of mood and anxiety disorders and is a source of considerable distress for sufferers (Brewin, 1998). In recent years it has been established that in

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clinical populations such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sufferers use avoidant coping methods to deal with their trauma (e.g., by avoiding situations that might remind them of the trauma, thought suppression, avoiding discussing the trauma). Cognitive and behavioral avoidance of trauma-related stimuli is argued to maintain intrusive symptomatology (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). It is also well known that thought suppression strategies can have the paradoxical effect of causing an individual to experience more thoughts of the unwanted memory (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). The aim of the present study was to study whether thought suppression ability can be generalized to novel stimuli, in a nonclinical sample within an experimental design.

A recent meta-analysis of 28 controlled thought suppression studies found evidence of a small to moderate rebound increase in postsuppression thought frequency in clinical, subclinical and nonclinical samples (Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001). These studies also demonstrated that complete suppression is difficult to achieve, indicating that individuals experience target thoughts and memories during the suppression phases of these experiments. Less clear is the ease with which thought suppression ability can be successfully applied to new situations or stimuli, and the factors that might influence this ability. Although some studies have included control stimuli in addition to the target stimuli of interest (e.g., a white bear and traumatic memory), to our knowledge, no study has examined how individuals who vary in suppression ability perform in response to both novel negative and neutral stimuli. Understanding this is important for several reasons. First, although it is clear there are individual differences in suppression ability, and a number of studies have either not found a rebound effect or only partially so (e.g., Muris, Merckelbach, van den Hout, & de Jong, 1992; Rutledge, Hollenberg, & Hancock, 1993), these studies have not tested simultaneously suppression ability over a range of stimuli. In addition, these studies have typically focussed on the rebound effect, not the act of suppressing itself. Second, the importance of studying both novel and autobiographical experiences is underscored by the finding that self-selected negative thoughts (possibly subjected to previous suppression attempts) do not always demonstrate the rebound effect following suppression (e.g., Kelly & Kahn, 1994). Studying novel and autobiographical events simultaneously would shed light on whether suppression ability is a trait- or state-like characteristic. Indirectly testing this issue in a clinical sample of trauma survivors, Shipherd and Beck (2005) observed that individuals with PTSD demonstrated a rebound effect following suppression of thoughts of a motor vehicle accident compared with non-PTSD individuals, but not when suppressing neutral events. Third, as discussed below, increasing attention is being paid to individual differences that might impact on thought suppression ability. To date, however, these tend to be studied in isolation, with reference to the target thought or memory, and not in relation to a potential differential relationship to the stimuli under investigation. That is, does a variable that is shown to relate to ability to suppress autobiographical experiences have the same association with suppression of new or novel stimuli?

Certain aspects of intellectual functioning have been proposed to relate to suppression ability. This is particularly relevant to a clinical disorder such as PTSD, which is characterised by intrusive thoughts and memories, given evidence that suggests lower intelligence is a risk factor for the development of the disorder (Macklin et al., 1998). There is also indirect support for the link between intrusive imagery and components of intelligence. Rutledge et al. (1993) found that difficulty in suppressing unwanted thoughts was associated with lower scores on a scholastic aptitude test. Brewin and Beaton (2002) observed that in university students, ability to suppress

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