

A mediational model of trait negative affectivity, dispositional thought suppression, and intrusive thoughts following laboratory stressors

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Received 14 October 2005; received in revised form 1 May 2006; accepted 15 June 2006

Abstract

Two studies examined the relationships among trait negative affectivity, dispositional thought suppression, and intrusions in non-clinical samples. In Study 1 ($N = 87$), participants were presented with a series of emotionally evocative images and intrusions were examined 48 h after presentation via self-report. In Study 2 ($N = 118$), intrusions were examined using a behavioral Key-press and self-report at two time points (5 and 20 min) following exposure to a series of emotionally evocative images. In each study, participants were assessed for trait negative affectivity and the tendency to engage in thought suppression in response to unpleasant cognitions. Results from both studies support a model in which chronic thought suppression fully mediates the relationship between negative affectivity and the frequency of intrusions. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Thought suppression; Negative affectivity; Intrusions; Experiential avoidance

Introduction

Negative affectivity is a dimension of temperament that is reflected in stable individual differences in the degree of reactivity and intensity with which an individual reacts to specific negative emotion-eliciting events (Goldsmith, 1993; Kagan & Snidman, 1991; Larsen, Diener, & Emmons, 1986; Schimmack & Diener, 1997; Strelau, 1991). Negative affectivity has been associated with the tendency to experience intrusive thoughts (Kelly & Nauta, 1997; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Indeed, negative affectivity has been found to be associated with a number of psychological disorders characterized by intrusive thoughts (e.g., Brown, Chorpita, & Barlow, 1998; Iancu et al., 1999). However, to date the mechanism linking negative affectivity and intrusions remains unclear. A number of studies have reported that thought suppression (the tendency to attempt not to

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think about unpleasant thoughts) is associated with psychological distress in general (e.g., Cheavens et al., 2005; Lynch, Robins, Morse, & Krause, 2001; Rosenthal, Cheavens, Lejuez, & Lynch, 2005), and greater intrusions specifically (Dunmore, Clark, & Ehlers, 2001; Engelhard, van den Hout, Kindt, Arntz, & Schouten, 2003; Wastell, 2002). However, no studies to date have elucidated whether suppression accounts for the relationship between negative affectivity and the frequency of intrusions. Accordingly, the primary purpose of the present studies is to examine the relationship between negative affectivity and intrusion frequency following exposure to laboratory stressors and to investigate how the tendency to engage in thought suppression might affect this relationship.

Negative affectivity

Studies suggest that individuals high in negative affectivity tend to respond to emotional stimuli with specific coping strategies. In a set of studies, Larsen, Diener, and Cropanzano (1987) examined coping responses associated with varying affect intensity levels. Results suggest that when individuals high in negative affectivity are exposed to emotionally relevant stimuli, they tend to engage in a characteristic set of cognitive operations including personalization, selective abstraction, and overgeneralization. Individuals high in negative affectivity also have been shown to endorse emotion-oriented coping strategies with a focus on attempting to regulate affect following the experience of a stressful event, whereas individuals low in negative affectivity are significantly less likely to endorse emotion-oriented coping (Flett, Blankstein, & Obertynski, 1996). Although these studies did not investigate thought suppression per se, results suggest that high negative affectivity individuals engage in different coping strategies than low negative affectivity individuals and the selection of coping strategies is likely related to the subsequent emotional responses (e.g., increased distress, intrusive thoughts).

Negative affectivity and intrusions

Intrusions refer to thoughts that come to mind even though they are unwanted. Intrusive thoughts have been identified as central to a number of clinical disorders, most notably post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Davies & Clark, 1998a, b; Dunmore et al., 2001; Shipherd & Beck, 1999), acute stress disorder (ASD; Guthrie & Bryant, 2000; Harvey & Bryant, 1998), depression (Wenzlaff, Meier, & Salas, 2002; Wenzlaff, Rude, & West, 2002), and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD; Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, 1997; Purdon & Clark, 2000; Purdon & Clark, 2001; Salkovskis, 1999).

Several studies have linked intrusions to measures of temperament or personality closely related to negative affectivity, such as increases in state negative affect (Davies & Clark, 1998a), negative emotionality (Miller, 2003), and emotional responsivity (Horowitz & Wilner, 1976). In one study, negative emotionality, defined as a disposition toward negative mood and emotion, was identified as the primary personality risk factor for the development of PTSD, a disorder marked by recurrent intrusive thoughts (Miller, 2003). Moreover, Horowitz and Wilner (1976) found that participants who identified themselves as high in emotional reactivity experienced significantly more intrusions following a film containing scenes of bodily injury than participants who rated themselves as low in emotional reactivity. Although there is a distinct lack of research that directly examines negative affectivity in relation to intrusion frequency, evidence from related studies suggests that individuals who tend to report strong negative affect are more likely than others to experience intrusive thoughts.

Thought suppression

Wegner and colleagues conducted pioneering work (e.g., Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987) demonstrating that thought suppression results in paradoxical effects: namely an immediate and/or delayed increase in the target thought (see Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001; Purdon, 1999; Rassin, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000 for reviews). Prospective, retrospective, and analogue studies have provided evidence that thought suppression may be involved in the development and maintenance of post-traumatic intrusions. In one prospective study, 1370 pregnant volunteers were assessed for thought

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