

A comparison of the effects of thought suppression, distraction and concentration

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Abstract

This study compared the effects of suppression, focused-distraction, and concentration on controlling unwanted distressing thoughts, and examined how anxiety levels were associated with the use of each thought-control technique. In the study, college students were told to suppress thoughts about a distressing story, to suppress the same thoughts by focusing on an alternative distraction task, to simply concentrate on that alternative task, or to think about anything without restrictions for 6 minutes. This initial period was followed by a “free-thinking” period to assess the delayed effect of thought-control techniques. The results indicated that focused-distraction and concentration led to fewer intrusions of target thoughts than suppression, and concentration in turn resulted in fewer target intrusions than focused-distraction during the initial period. Participants in the focused-distraction and concentration condition also tended to report lower anxiety during the initial period than those who were told to suppress thoughts.

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Introduction

It is very common for people to experience unwanted intrusive thoughts (Rachman & de Silva, 1978; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984). Salkovskis and Harrison (1984) found that 88% of the non-clinical subjects in their study reported experiencing unwanted thought intrusions. When an unwanted thought occurs, people may try to deal with it by avoiding it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus, 1966). This tendency to suppress one's unwanted thoughts in order to achieve a sense of well-being has been suggested in Freud's (1975) work. Yet, the effect of thought suppression has not been systematically examined until recently.

In Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White's (1987) research, half of the subjects were first instructed to “try not to think of a white bear” for 5 min and then to think of it in the next 5 min (the initial suppression condition), whereas the other half of the subjects received the same instructions in the reverse order (the initial

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expression condition). The results showed that subjects who had initially suppressed thoughts of a white bear experienced more such thoughts during the expressive period than those who had not initially suppressed target thoughts. Therefore, this may suggest that the suppression attempt may ironically cause people to be preoccupied with the unwanted thoughts even more after the suppression attempt ceased. Wegner and his colleague thus called this paradoxical phenomenon of thought suppression the “rebound effect.”

To date, more research has accumulated in the area of thought suppression (e.g., Brewin & Beaton, 2002; Höping & de Jong-Meyer, 2003; Markowitz & Borton, 2002; Oliver & Huon, 2001; Parkinson & Rachman, 1981; Rassin & Diepstraten, 2003; Rassin, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000; Rassin, van Brakel, & Diederer, 2003; Renaud & McConnell, 2002; Rutledge, 1998; Rutledge, Hancock, & Rutledge, 1996; Tolin, Abramowitz, Hamlin, Foa, & Synodi, 2002), but the findings remain mixed (Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000) in that some studies have found the postsuppressional rebound effect (e.g., Kelly & Kahn, 1994; Muris, Merckelbach, van den Hout, & de Jong, 1992; Wenzlaff & Bates, 2000), but some studies found the immediate enhancement effect of suppression (e.g., Lavy & van den Hout, 1990; Muris et al., 1992; Turner & Engle, 1989), while other studies did not find any ironic effects (i.e., the rebound or immediate enhancement effect) due to suppression (e.g., Davies & Clark, 1998; Purdon & Clark, 2001; Roemer & Borkovec, 1994; Rutledge, Hollenberg, & Hancock, 1993). Therefore, it seems that the paradoxical effect of thought suppression is not a phenomenon that occurs consistently. One of the factors that are believed to influence the effects of thought suppression is the method that people use to control their thoughts (Cioffi & Holloway, 1993; Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994; Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994; Wegner et al., 1987).

The negative-cuing hypothesis (Wegner et al., 1987; Wegner, Schneider, Knutson, & McMahon, 1991) suggests that the rebound effect is more likely to occur when people suppress thoughts by focusing on items found in the immediate environment for self-distraction since those distracters may later become associated with the negative cue—“not white bear”, thus reminding people of the target thoughts after the suppression attempt is lifted.

On the other hand, research showed that the rebound effect may not occur when people suppress target thoughts by focusing on only one distracter. For example, Wegner et al. (1987) found that subjects who were told to suppress the thought of a white bear by thinking of a “red Volkswagen” (the focused-distraction” condition) did not experience the postsuppressional rebound effect, whereas those in the typical suppression condition experienced a rebound during the subsequent expression period. These results thus suggest that suppressing thoughts by focusing on a specific, non-environment-associated distracter may serve as a strategy to attenuate the postsuppressional rebound effect.

Salkovskis and Campbell’s (1994) study provided further evidence of the positive effects of focused-distraction. In their study, two types of distraction conditions were compared: one was General Distraction (no specific distracters provided), while the other was Specific Distraction (a specific distraction task was provided to focus on). They found that simply instructing subjects to suppress personal negative thoughts by self-distraction without informing them of what to focus on did not work any better than the traditional suppression instruction in which subjects were simply told to suppress their thoughts. In contrast, when told to suppress target thoughts by focusing on a given distraction task, subjects not only experienced no postsuppressional rebound effect during the subsequent free-thinking period but also experienced significantly fewer target thoughts than the suppression-alone and the general-distraction groups during both experimental periods.

Similar results were found with the suppression of thoughts about smoking (Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994) and thoughts of physical pain (Cioffi & Holloway, 1993). In Salkovskis and Reynolds’ (1994) study, subjects who were told to suppress thoughts by focusing on a specific distraction task (i.e., a breathing exercise) did not experience a postsuppressional increase in target thoughts and also experienced fewer smoking thoughts than the suppression group during the suppression and subsequent free-thinking periods. In addition, subjects in the focused-distraction condition reported less discomfort relative to occurrences of smoking-related thoughts than did those in the other conditions. Similarly, Cioffi and Holloway (1993) found that participants who were told to distract themselves by visualizing the details of their room at home recovered from their discomfort (induced from immersing hands in the ice-cold water) more quickly than those who were told to not think about their hand sensations.

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