

The Impact of Ruminative Processing on the Experience of Self-Referent Intrusive Memories in Dysphoria

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The current study sought to experimentally assess the differential effects of analytical ruminative processing and distraction on the experience of self-referent naturally occurring intrusive memories in a sample of dysphoric ($BDI-II \geq 12$) participants. Seventy-seven undergraduate participants completed a memory interview to elicit details about a self-referential intrusion and were randomly assigned to either an analytical rumination or distraction condition. Subsequent to the rumination induction, participants rated their intrusive memory as more negative, more distressing, and more evocative of a negative emotional response compared to participants who were allocated to the distraction induction. Inducing analytical rumination also resulted in participants reporting worse (i.e., more sad) mood relative to those in the distraction condition. The findings align with the suggestion that depressed individuals may get caught up in a ruminative cycle that, due to the documented effects of analytical self-focus, exacerbate the emotional response elicited by intrusions and perpetuate biased attentional focus on them. Directions for future investigations of the cognitive processes that are important in the maintenance of intrusions in depressive disorders are discussed.

DEPRESSIVE RUMINATION HAS BEEN defined as repetitive but passive thinking about current depression symptoms and their causes, meanings, and con-

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sequences (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Correlational and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that rumination predicts the onset of depression and prolongs the experience of negative mood in dysphoric individuals (Just & Alloy, 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Vickers & Vogeltanz-Holm, 2003). Experimental studies have shown that inducing rumination by having participants read through various self-focusing statements (“Think about: the possible consequences of your current mental state”; see Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) for several minutes results in the maintenance or enhancement of negative mood in dysphoric and clinically depressed individuals. By comparison, reading distracting statements (e.g., “Think about: clouds forming in the sky”) has an ameliorative effect (Gibbons et al., 1985; Lyubomirsky, Caldwell, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Watkins & Teasdale, 2004).

These findings have been accounted for by Nolen-Hoeksema's (1987) Response Styles Theory, which suggests that rumination has the effect of narrowing one's attentional focus to negative information such that negative mood is exacerbated. By comparison, distraction permits a disruption in this attentional bias, thus allowing for adaptive recourse (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1993). Although the use of distraction may attenuate the experience of negative affective states, this attenuation may only occur under certain circumstances or provide remedial benefits in the short-term (Hamilton & Ingram, 2001).

Recent studies of rumination have highlighted that this cognitive process can be broken down into adaptive and maladaptive subtypes. The work of Watkins and colleagues (Watkins, 2004, 2008; Watkins & Teasdale, 2001, 2004) has highlighted the distinction between concrete/experiential self-focus, which involves a focus on moment-to-moment experience (e.g., *How do I feel?*), and abstract/analytical ruminative self-focus that is characterized by “why” questions (e.g., *Why do I feel this way?*). There is evidence that the analytical mode of processing leads to poor social problem solving (Watkins & Moulds, 2005) and the maintenance of overgeneral memory retrieval (Watkins & Teasdale, 2004) in individuals with major depressive disorder. Further, participants who engaged in analytical rumination following a negative failure task reported more intrusions about the task 24 hours later (Watkins, 2004) compared to participants who were engaged in an experiential mode of processing.

Mental intrusions, particularly in the form of memories of negative autobiographical events, are associated with ruminative self-focus (Starr & Moulds, 2006; Williams & Moulds, 2007a) and have been implicated in the maintenance of depressive symptoms (Brewin, Reynolds, & Tata, 1999). Watkins (2004) proposed that engaging in rumination following a negative event prevents successful emotional processing and thus has an impact on the recurrence of the event (via intrusions) and on the distress associated such intrusions. We addressed this hypothesis in a previous study (Williams & Moulds, 2007b). Extending the work of Watkins (2004), we employed a film clip to experimentally induce intrusions and explore the differential impact of an analytical, experiential, and distraction induction on the subsequent experience of intrusions of the content of the film clip. Although the film clip was effective in creating intrusions that were comparable to naturally occurring intrusive memories (Williams & Moulds, 2007c), the results did not support our primary hypothesis that analytical processing would lead to increased intrusions relative to experiential processing.

One explanation that we put forward to account for these unexpected findings was the non-self-referential nature of the intrusions. Self-referential material refers to information that is directly linked to one's sense of self and thus conveys important information about one's personal character. This can be contrasted with self-relevant material that is defined as information that is important to an individual but is not linked directly to his or her sense of self; that is, material that does not also hold self-referential meaning (Borton, Markowitz, &

Dieterich, 2005). It may be that the effects of analytical rumination on intrusion characteristics are more toxic if the material is not only self-relevant but is also self-referential. This notion served as the basis for experimental investigation in the current study. Additionally, given that previous studies have demonstrated that the distress caused by intrusive memories is independent of their frequency (Starr & Moulds, 2006; Williams & Moulds, 2007a, c), the null findings could also reflect measurement inadequacies. Specifically, the sole focus on intrusion frequency as the marker of unsuccessful processing may have prevented detection of changes in the affective impact of intrusive memories following rumination—for example, reductions in intrusion-related distress. Accordingly, the current study indexed additional features of intrusive memories to gauge the respective effects of the processing inductions.

In light of previous evidence suggesting it is specifically the analytical form of ruminative self-focus that leads to adverse outcomes (Watkins, 2004; Watkins & Moulds, 2005; Watkins & Teasdale, 2004), the current study sought to experimentally assess the differential effects of analytical ruminative processing and distraction on the *experience*, rather than the *frequency*, of self-referent naturally occurring intrusive memories in a matched sample of dysphoric participants. We hypothesized that participants assigned to the analytical condition would report greater levels of post-manipulation intrusion-related distress, intrusion-related sadness, intrusion valence (negativity), and general negative affect (decreased positive mood and increases negative mood) than participants allocated to the distraction condition.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students from the University of New South Wales were initially recruited to participate in exchange for course credit. As the current study investigated intrusive memories in the context of dysphoria and depressed mood, only dysphoric participants (see below) were included in the analyses. The final sample consisted of 57 females and 20 males with a mean age of 19.57 ($SD = 5.16$).

MEASURES

Intrusive Memory Interview (following Hackmann, Ehlers, Speckens, & Clark, 2004)

The items on the Intrusive Memory Interview were drawn from a number of validated inventories and have been used in previous research (Williams &

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