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Suppressing and focusing on a negative memory in social anxiety: Effects on unwanted thoughts and mood

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Abstract

Researchers have hypothesized that thought suppression contributes to the large volume of unwanted thoughts in anxiety disorders. However, comparisons to both non-suppression and non-anxious groups are necessary for studies on thought suppression in high anxiety. Participants completed a series of thought verbalization periods and a social interaction. During one period, participants were randomly assigned to focus upon a negative social memory, suppress it, or think freely while monitoring the memory. Results indicated that thought suppression and focusing caused a greater rise and subsequent decline in unwanted thoughts than monitoring instructions for both high and low social anxiety groups. Importantly, highly socially anxious participants had more unwanted thoughts overall, but did not respond significantly differently to thinking instructions when compared to the less anxious group. Interestingly, highly socially anxious participants did report more thought suppression attempts in their everyday life. They also appeared to benefit by experiencing less shyness after suppression when compared to focusing, a pattern not evident for the low social anxiety group.

Introduction

Researchers have recently become interested in the application of thought suppression models to the understanding of anxiety disorders. It has been well documented that anxious populations report an excessive number of unwanted thoughts and attempts to control these thoughts (Amir, Cashman, & Foa, 1997; Freeston & Ladoucer, 1997; Warda & Bryant, 1998). Consequently, it is important to determine whether anxious populations simply experience more unwanted thoughts, or whether they also address them with ineffective control strategies. In the latter case, unsuccessful control strategies may inadvertently play a causal role in producing further unwanted thoughts (Rassin, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000).

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Thought suppression is one control strategy that has been frequently found to be counterproductive (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). During thought suppression, it is believed that individuals engage in an effortful search for distracters while simultaneously monitoring automatically for further thought instances (Wegner, 1994). According to this theoretical account, cognitive demands during suppression serve to disable the effortful search for distracters and allow the automatic monitoring process to enhance the accessibility of the thought. This enhancement of unwanted thoughts during suppression is known as an ''initial enhancement'' effect of suppression. An alternative method by which studies have identified ironic effects of suppression is by examining whether enhancement occurs in thought periods after the suppression period. In this case, the effortful search process ends, while the residual accessibility from the automatic monitoring process leads to an enhancement in thoughts. This enhancement is termed as ''rebound effect'' because unwanted thoughts rebound once a person no longer attempts to suppress them. Studies have supported both of these ideas, as researchers have found that persons attempting to suppress target thoughts often ironically end up thinking more about those thoughts when simultaneously encountering other cognitive demands (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994; for a review, see Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Additionally, there seems to be a small to moderate rebound effect across studies (Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001).

Wenzlaff and Wegner (2000) speculated that anxiety sufferers' unwanted thoughts may be characterized by a ''self-loading system'' based on this model. They proposed that an anxious mood prevents successful suppression by drawing cognitive resources away from the effortful component of suppression attempts. Without the necessary cognitive resources, the individual is left vulnerable to unwanted thoughts primed by the automatic monitoring process described above. The added anxiety of experiencing thought suppression failure results in a feedback loop, increasing the ironic effects of attempted suppression in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Social anxiety offers a useful avenue to test this model of thought suppression. It is relatively (a) common, (b) easy to manipulate, and (c) easy to observe in an ecologically valid manner even within an experimental setting (i.e., by arranging for a social interaction). Thus, social anxiety offers a chance to extend models of thought suppression beyond their most obvious applications to obsessive–compulsive disorder.

As with other forms of anxiety (and depression), the experience of social anxiety often involves unwanted thoughts or imagery that would be likely targets for thought suppression. Leading cognitive–behavioral models have hypothesized that socially anxious people experience excessively negative self-imagery that encourages the biased processing of social situations (Clark & Wells, 1995), and several studies have supported this hypothesis experimentally (Hirsch, Clark, Mathews, & Williams, 2003; Hirsch, Meynen, & Clark, 2004). Thought suppression models suggest that attempting to suppress such negative self-imagery may have the unintended effect of increasing its salience under some conditions. Given that anxious populations frequently utilize strategies like thought suppression (Amir et al., 1997; Freeston & Ladoucer, 1997; Warda & Bryant, 1998), it is likely that socially anxious people frequently attempt to suppress the negative self-imagery they experience in social interactions.

Interestingly, the limited research on thought suppression and social anxiety has suggested that thought suppression may function differently in social anxiety than in other disorders. In one study, researchers found possible indications that under non-cognitively demanding conditions social phobia may be characterized by a more wide-ranging impairment in thought suppression ability than other anxiety disorders (Fehm & Margraf, 2002). Complicating the picture, others have found that highly socially anxious participants may actually suppress more successfully when anticipating a social threat than when not anticipating a threat (Cougle, Smits, Powers, Lee, & Telch, 2005). The current study builds upon these intriguing suggestions by using non-anxious comparison groups as well as several types of non-suppression thinking instructions. We also employ sufficient cognitive demands as to ensure a test of the ''self-loading system'' proposed by Wenzlaff and Wegner (2000).

In short, there is evidence that both anxiety group status and the use of thought suppression can independently contribute to the number of unwanted thoughts experienced (Becker, Rinck, Roth, & Margraf, 1998; Fehm & Margraf, 2002; Harvey & Bryant, 1998; Mathews & Milroy, 1994; Muris, de Jongh, Merckelbach, Postema, & Vet, 1998; Muris, Merckelbach, Horselenberg, Sijsenaar, & Leeuw, 1997), but there seems to be little support for an interaction between the two. A few researchers have found an