



Adaptive and maladaptive ruminative self-focus during emotional processing

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Abstract

Ruminative self-focus on mood, problems and other aspects of self-experience can have both maladaptive consequences, perpetuating depression, and, adaptive consequences, promoting recovery from upsetting events. Increasing evidence suggests that these contrasting effects may be explained by distinct varieties of ruminative self-focus, each with distinct functional properties. This study tested the prediction (Emotional processing, three modes of mind and the prevention of relapse in depression. *Behav. Res. Therapy*, 37 (1999) S53) that an experiential mode of self-focused attention would facilitate recovery from an upsetting event in comparison to a conceptual-evaluative mode of self-focused attention. To test these contrasting effects experimentally, 69 participants wrote about an induced failure experience in either a conceptual-evaluative condition (e.g. “Why did you feel this way?”), or an experiential condition (“How did you feel moment-by-moment?”). Consistent with the hypothesis, higher levels of trait disposition to ruminate were associated with relatively greater increases in negative mood 12 h after the failure in the conceptual-evaluative condition compared to the experiential condition. Furthermore, the conceptual-evaluative condition resulted in more intrusions about the failure than the experiential condition. These results support the differentiation of rumination into distinct modes of self-focused attention with distinct functional effects; a conceptual-evaluative mode that is maladaptive and an experiential mode that is adaptive.

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1. Introduction

This paper will present an experimental study that is framed within the recent theoretical work of John Teasdale and builds upon work that started under his supervision. As such, I hope that this paper will serve as a grateful acknowledgement of the inestimable positive influence John Teasdale has had on my own thinking, career and life.

Rumination has been defined as “behaviour and thoughts that focus one’s attention on one’s depressive symptoms and on the implications of these symptoms” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991: p. 569). A large and consistent body of research has developed indicating the maladaptive and detrimental consequences of focus on depressed mood, problems, and other aspects of negative self-experience. Thus, increased self-focus is associated with depression (Ingram, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987) and rumination increases the likelihood, severity and duration of syndromal depression (e.g. Just & Alloy, 1997; Kuehner & Weber, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Spasojevic & Alloy, 2001). In experimental studies, rumination intensifies dysphoric mood and negative thinking, whilst impairing problem solving (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999; Watkins & Baracaia, 2002).

However, on the other hand, focus on depressed mood, problems, and other aspects of negative self-experience can have beneficial and adaptive outcomes. First, prolonged focus on negative emotional material is hypothesized to be an essential component of successful emotional processing, defined as “a process whereby emotional disturbances are absorbed and decline to the extent that other experiences and behaviour can proceed without disruption” (Rachman, 1980: p. 51). Indeed, evidence from expressive writing studies indicates that repeated focus on upsetting and emotional events and associated thoughts and feelings produces long-term improvements in mental and physical health (e.g. Esterling, L’Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999; Pennebaker, 1993; Smyth, 1998; Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), as well as reductions in negative mood or depressive symptoms over shorter time periods (Hunt, 1998; Lepore, 1997).

Second, increased focus on problems, internal states and other aspects of self-experience can lead to more effective self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1990), as well as to greater self-awareness and greater self-knowledge. Increased self-awareness is arguably a critical factor in learning to effectively regulate emotional states (see discussion on benefits of self-focused attention in McFarland & Buehler, 1998). Consistent with this argument, cognitive-behavioural therapy, which explicitly increases the focus on negative experience, is an effective treatment for anxiety and depression. More specifically, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), a treatment that teaches recovered depressed patients to become more aware of their upsetting thoughts and feelings significantly reduces relapse in patients with a history of three or more previous episodes of major depression, compared to treatment-as-usual (Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby and Lau, 2000).

How can these disparate effects of recurrent focus on mood, problems and other aspects of self-experience be explained? One possible resolution to these contrasting consequences of rumination is the notion that it is not just the content of rumination that is important (that is, the focus on negative mood, problems and self) but also that the precise manner in which people attend to these aspects of self-experience determines the consequences of self-focus (McFarland & Buehler, 1998; Teasdale, 1999). This possibility is supported by growing evidence that there

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