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The management of unwanted pre-sleep thoughts in insomnia: distraction with imagery versus general distraction

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Abstract

Insomniacs commonly complain that they are unable to get to sleep at night due to unwanted thoughts, worries and concerns. The present study investigated whether brief training in identifying and elaborating an interesting and engaging imagery task for use during the pre-sleep period can reduce unwanted pre-sleep cognitive activity and sleep onset latency. Forty one people with insomnia were given one of three instructional sets to follow on the experimental night; instructions to distract using imagery, general instructions to distract, or no instructions. Based on previous findings reported by Salkovskis & Campbell (1994) 'Behaviour Research and Therapy 32 (1994) 1' and ironic control theory (Wegner, 1994) 'Psychological Review 101 (1994) 34', it was predicted that (1) "imagery distraction" would be associated with shorter sleep onset latency and less frequent and distressing pre-sleep cognitive activity compared to the "no instruction" group and that (2) "general distraction" would be associated with longer sleep onset latency and more frequent and distressing pre-sleep cognitive activity compared to the "no instruction" group. Support was found for the first but not the second prediction. The success of the "imagery distraction" task is attributed to it occupying sufficient "cognitive space" to keep the individual from re-engaging with thoughts, worries, and concerns during the pre-sleep period. In addition, "imagery distraction" involved a very specific alternative cognitive task hence the operating process was given a feature positive search, conditions where mental control is likely to be achieved. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Most people with insomnia complain of being unable to fall asleep because they cannot switch off their "racing" mind (Espie, Brooks, & Lindsay, 1989; Geer & Katkin, 1966; Harvey, 2000; Lichstein & Rosenthal, 1980). While uncontrollable pre-sleep cognitive activity is not a proven cause of insomnia (Freedman & Sattler, 1982), there is ample evidence to suggest that the manipulation of pre-sleep cognitive activity leads to changes to sleep onset latency (Ansfield, Wegner, &

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Bowser, 1996; Gross & Borkovec, 1982). Together, these observations highlight the importance of identifying and understanding the factors that perpetuate unwanted pre-sleep cognitive activity. Investigations relating to the strategies adopted to cope with or manage unwanted thoughts, the suppression of thoughts in particular, have been implicated in fuelling the thoughts across a range of disorders (Harvey & Bryant, 1998; Salkovskis & Reynolds, 1994; Salkovskis et al., 1995 cited in Salkovskis & Kirk, 1997; Shipherd & Beck, 1999), including insomnia (Harvey 2001, 2002).

Thought suppression is likely to be a multifaceted thought management strategy. Salkovskis and Campbell (1994) differentiated between simple suppression instructions, suppression with general instructions to distract, suppression with general “don’t distract” instructions, and suppression supplemented with a competing and engaging alternative task. Consistent with Wegner’s classic experiments (Wegner, 1989), an increase in the frequency of the target thought was noted when simple suppression was attempted. The particularly intriguing finding was that a decreased frequency was noted when suppression instructions were accompanied by instructions to replace the target thought with a specific engaging task. These findings raise the possibility that while some thought control strategies are unhelpful and maintain disorders, others effectively intervene and relieve the individual of their unwanted thoughts. The success of the engaging and interesting cognitive task in the Salkovskis and Campbell (1994) study is explicable in that the task occupied sufficient “cognitive space” to keep the individual from re-engaging with the personally relevant negative intrusive thought that was suppressed. This interpretation sheds light on a study with insomniacs reported by Haynes, Adams, and Franzen (1981). Haynes and colleagues found that challenging mental arithmetic problems reduced subjective sleep latency reports among insomniacs. Two accounts have been offered for these findings; that they are inconsistent with a cognitive account of insomnia because any cognitive activity/pre-sleep stress should interfere with sleep onset (e.g., Espie, 1991; Haynes et al., 1981) and that by providing a causal explanation for sleeplessness (the arithmetic) pre-sleep anxiety reduced making getting to sleep easier (Haynes et al., 1981). A third account is that the mathematical problems functioned as an alternative task that was sufficiently interesting and engaging to occupy the cognitive space that would otherwise be taken up with worrisome pre-sleep cognitive activity (Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994).

Wegner (1994) proposed that the level of mental control enjoyed by an individual at any one time is a function of the joint action of a monitoring and operating process. The theory maintains that attempted suppression involves (a) an operating process that directs attention toward a thought other than the unwanted one and (b) a monitoring process that searches for failures to achieve the desired state. Wegner proposed that because the monitoring process is less demanding of cognitive effort than the operating process, it can sensitise attention to the very thoughts targeted for avoidance. This ironic effect is enhanced under conditions of cognitive load because the operating process is more demanding of attentional resources than the monitoring process (Ansfield et al., 1996; Wegner & Erber, 1992; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993). Importantly, the operating and monitoring processes can both engage in a feature positive search (looking for the presence of the target) or a feature negative search (looking for the absence of the target); the latter being harder than the former (Newman, Wolff, & Hearst, 1980).

Wegner’s ironic control theory suggests three solutions to the problem of obtaining mental control. First, mental control will be more successful if all attempts to control cognitive activity are abandoned, a position endorsed within the insomnia literature (Espie & Wicklow, 2002). Second, aiming for the opposite of mental control should be a successful strategy. This is a

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