

Five Indices of Emotion Regulation in Participants With a History of Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: A Daily Diary Study

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Theory has proposed that nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a response to intense frequent negative affect (NA) that is difficult to control. Therefore, individual differences that are related to emotion dysregulation should be higher in individuals who engage in NSSI compared to healthy controls. Though current research supports this prediction, this research could be strengthened by corroborating evidence from daily diary studies. The current study used a daily diary protocol to thoroughly examine the emotional correlates of NSSI. Individuals with and without a history of NSSI rated their affect daily for 14 days. This information was used to score multiple indices of emotionality (e.g., mean level, within-person variation, reactivity). The results showed that compared to controls, individuals who engaged in NSSI had higher mean levels, within-person variation, and lower emotional differentiation of NA, but groups did not differ on inertia of NA or reactivity of NA. Moreover, individuals with a history of NSSI reported lower levels of positive affect and lower inertia of positive affect. These results are discussed in terms of affect regulation models of NSSI and treatment implications.

Keywords: self-injury; self-harm; negative affect; diary study

NONSUICIDAL SELF-INJURY (NSSI) IS DEFINED as the intentional destruction of one's own body tissue

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without suicidal intent (Nock, 2009). Prominent theories of NSSI focus on the role of emotions, particularly emotional dysregulation, as a vulnerability factor for engagement in NSSI (Chapman, Gratz, & Brown, 2006; Linehan, 1993; Nock). Therefore, understanding facets of emotion regulation that differ between individuals with and without a history of NSSI may be a way to identify candidate vulnerability factors that are involved in the onset and maintenance of NSSI. Though some research has found that individuals who engage in NSSI report higher levels of individual differences related to emotion dysregulation (e.g., neuroticism; Brown, 2008) than controls, these studies have relied on retrospective self-report measures of long time frames (e.g., “How do you feel in general?”), which are known to be influenced by multiple biases, particularly in regard to individual differences in emotion and emotion regulation (Robinson & Clore, 2002). Currently, there is an absence of studies examining the difference between individuals with and without a history of NSSI on indices of emotion dysregulation based on daily ratings of affect. In this vein, the goal of the current study was to examine the emotional correlates of NSSI in an ecologically valid manner using a daily diary study.

AFFECT AND EMOTION DYSREGULATION

Affect has generally been conceptualized to consist of two components: valence (unpleasant to pleasant) and arousal (low to high; Larsen & Diener, 1992; Russell, 1980; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). Within this two-dimensional affective space, negative affect (NA) is defined as unpleasant valence that is high in arousal (with low arousal, pleasant affect [e.g., relaxed] as the opposite pole), whereas positive affect (PA) is defined as pleasant valence that is high in arousal (with low arousal, unpleasant affect [e.g., sluggish] as the opposite pole; Watson,

Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Though in a true circumplex structure the correlation between NA and PA would be zero, the relationship between them is negative and moderate to small (Watson, 2000). However, the strength of the relationship depends on the time frame assessed, with shorter time frames (e.g., “right now”) leading to larger correlations than longer time frames (e.g., “in general”; Watson). Still, NA and PA are generally considered to be unique constructs (Watson; though see Russell & Carroll, 1999). This suggests that studying NA and PA separately is important because dysregulation in one (e.g., NA) does not necessarily imply dysregulation in the other (e.g., PA).

Berenbaum, Raghavan, Le, Vernon, and Gomez (2003) provide a useful taxonomy for the organization of emotional dysregulation, which includes three broad categories of disturbances. First, emotional valence disturbances occur when an individual experiences extremely high or extremely low levels of pleasant or unpleasant affect. For example, internalizing psychopathology may be characterized by high levels of NA (Watson, O'Hara, & Stuart, 2008). Second, emotional intensity disturbances occur when an individual is exceptionally over- or underreactive to emotional situations. For instance, it has been proposed that individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD) are overly sensitive to emotional cues (Linehan, 1993). Finally, emotional disconnections occur when the individual has a particularly low awareness of his or her own emotional experience. Awareness of emotion can be parsed into two components: attention to emotion (i.e., valuing and attending to emotions) and clarity of emotion (i.e., the ability to distinguish and identify emotions; Gohm & Clore, 2000). It is likely that being on either extreme of these emotional disturbances (e.g., overreactive, underreactive) can be maladaptive, but varying levels in between these extremes are likely adaptive.

Each of these disturbances could play a role in NSSI. For example, theory suggests that individuals who engage in NSSI frequently experience high levels of NA (Chapman et al., 2006; Nock, 2009), consistent with a valence disturbance in unpleasant emotions (i.e., too much high arousal, unpleasant emotion). This prediction has been supported by research showing that individuals with a history of NSSI report higher trait NA than individuals without a history of NSSI (Baetens, Claes, Willem, Muehlenkamp, & Bijttebier, 2011; Brown, 2008; Kamphuis, Ruyling, & Reijntjes, 2007; Maclaren & Best, 2010). Though other research also suggests that low-arousal unpleasant emotions are important in NSSI (Kamphuis et al., 2007; Nock, Prinstein, & Sterba, 2009), most research suggests that high-arousal unpleasant emo-

tions are more important in NSSI, given that they predict future NSSI (Nock et al., 2009) and are reduced more than low-arousal unpleasant emotions following engagement in NSSI (Klonsky, 2009). In terms of positive valence, it is unclear if individuals who engage in NSSI also report fewer experiences of PA compared to controls, as previous studies have not consistently found group differences in trait PA.

In addition to valence disturbances, it has been proposed that individuals who engage in NSSI are overreactive to emotional stimuli (Chapman et al., 2006; Linehan, 1993). Consistent with this, individuals who engage in NSSI have higher scores than controls on trait self-report measures of emotional reactivity (e.g., Glenn, Blumenthal, Klonsky, & Hajcak, 2011). However, as detailed below, experimental studies of emotional reactions in the laboratory have found mixed results. To date, studies have mostly focused on reactivity to negative stimuli; thus, it is unclear if individuals who engage in NSSI are over- or underreactive to positive stimuli.

Finally, previous cross-sectional research has found that individuals with a history of NSSI report lower levels of awareness and clarity of their emotions than controls (e.g., Gratz & Roemer, 2008; Polk & Liss, 2007). These results make sense in light of other research, which suggests that a lack of emotional awareness is related to poor mental health. For instance, lower levels of emotional differentiation, similar to emotional clarity, are related to the use of poor emotion-regulation strategies (Feldman Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001). Conversely, high emotional differentiation has been related to a decreased likelihood of engaging in impulsive behaviors (e.g., aggression) when experiencing intense emotions (e.g., anger; Pond et al., 2012). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that individuals who engage in NSSI would have poor emotional awareness. Because previous studies have only looked at the awareness of emotions in general, not awareness of NA or PA specifically, it is unclear whether the emotional awareness abilities of individuals who engage in NSSI would be general (i.e., affect overall) or specific (e.g., only for NA).

One aspect of emotion dysregulation that is not covered in the Berenbaum et al. (2003) model is variability. For example, two individuals could have the same valence disturbance (e.g., extremely high, unpleasant affect), but one may always have a high level, whereas the other may fluctuate greatly. This type of intra-individual variability could be important to understanding NSSI in at least two ways. On one hand, it is possible that individuals who engage in NSSI have high mean levels of NA and low variability. Thus, it might be hypothesized that they engage in NSSI as an attempt to regulate persistent

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