



Ruminative self-focus, negative life events, and negative affect

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 March 2008

Received in revised form 3 June 2008

Accepted 13 June 2008

Keywords:

Experience-sampling

Affect

Rumination

Stressors

Depression

ABSTRACT

Ruminative thinking is believed to exacerbate the psychological distress that follows stressful life events. An experience-sampling study was conducted in which participants recorded negative life events, ruminative self-focus, and negative affect eight times daily over one week. Occasions when participants reported a negative event were marked by higher levels of negative affect. Additionally, negative events were prospectively associated with higher levels of negative affect at the next sampling occasion, and this relationship was partially mediated by momentary ruminative self-focus. Depressive symptoms were associated with more frequent negative events, but not with increased reactivity to negative events. Trait rumination was associated with reports of more severe negative events and increased reactivity to negative events. These results suggest that the extent to which a person engages in ruminative self-focus after everyday stressors is an important determinant of the degree of distress experienced after such events. Further, dispositional measures of rumination predict mood reactivity to everyday stressors in a non-clinical sample.

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Introduction

Dysfunctional mood regulation has been highlighted as a key factor in the onset and maintenance of psychological distress. Particular interest has centred on rumination, defined by Nolen-Hoeksema (1991, p. 569) as “repetitively focusing on the fact that one is depressed; on one’s symptoms of depression; and on the causes, meanings, and consequences of depressive symptoms”. According to response styles theory (RST), a ruminative response style prolongs sad mood relative to engagement in pleasant, distracting activities (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, 2000). Considerable evidence suggests that dysphoric rumination exacerbates negative mood and negative cognition (see Lyubomirsky & Tkach, 2004; Watkins, 2008).

A related line of investigation addresses how rumination influences emotional reactions to stressful life events. Controlling initial levels of depression, a ruminative response style predicts future depressive symptoms in response to events such as the Loma Prieta earthquake (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) or the death of a loved one (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). Similarly, Robinson and Alloy (2003) reported that rumination on negative inferences after stressful events (*stress-reactive rumination*)

interacted with dysfunctional attitudes and negative attributional style to predict new depressive episodes among students.

Despite a large body of research suggesting that stressful life events are associated with short-term increases in negative affect (Marco & Suls, 1993; Suls, Green, & Hillis, 1998; Swendson, 1998), little is known about the role of rumination in this process. Thus, the first aim of this study was to address how negative affect fluctuates after everyday stressors, and whether levels of momentary ruminative self-focus mediate this relationship. The second aim was to investigate whether individuals who report high levels of trait rumination (high ruminators) show greater reactivity to negative life events than low ruminators.

Many studies examining the influence of rumination on reactivity to stressful events have used retrospective assessments that may not accurately reflect how individuals responded shortly after the stressful event (Stone et al., 1998). Daily diary designs represent an improvement in this regard (e.g., Wood, Saltzberg, Neale, Stone, & Rachmiel, 1990), but often require that reports of response styles are made several hours after their occurrence, increasing the probability of retrospective bias.

In experience-sampling methodology (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) studies, the participant provides ‘online’ data about experience as prompted by an alarm signal. Retrospective bias is thus virtually eliminated, although ESM remains susceptible to other response biases that are inherent in self-report measures (Stone et al., 1998). Furthermore, ESM can track fluctuations in affect and ruminative self-focus over relatively short temporal

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intervals, enabling the researcher to examine contingencies of which the participant may be unaware.

Peeters, Nicolson, Berkhof, Delespaul, and deVries (2003) used ESM to investigate the effect of positive and negative life events on mood among depressed individuals and non-depressed controls. Although negative events were associated with increased negative affect in both groups, depressed participants were less reactive to negative events than non-depressed participants. Swendson (1998) similarly found that negative events were associated with negative affect among undergraduates, but this relationship was not moderated by depressive symptomatology.

Given that rumination is normally conceptualized as a response to negative mood, one might expect rumination to moderate and/or mediate the impact of distressing events on psychological distress. In an ESM study of adolescents, Silk, Steinberg, and Morris (2003) found that the use of involuntary engagement strategies (including rumination) after negative events was associated with greater sadness and anger at a subsequent occasion, and that higher levels of involuntary engagement over the week were associated with more depressive symptoms. Unfortunately, this study did not uniquely address ruminative thinking.

We conducted an ESM study in which adults reported their negative affect, ruminative self-focus, and negative events eight times daily for one week. On each occasion, we measured momentary negative affect as a composite of sadness, anxiety, and irritation ratings, on the basis that rumination is associated with each of these affects (Blagden & Craske, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Participants indicated on each occasion whether or not they had experienced a recent negative event, provided a brief description of this event, and indicated how emotionally distressing it was.

We assessed momentary ruminative self-focus using a two-item measure comprising the extent to which people were focused on (i) their feelings and (ii) their problems. The first item corresponds to the facet of Nolen-Hoeksema's (1991) definition involving focus on depressive feelings. The second item corresponds to the facet of Nolen-Hoeksema's (1991) definition implicating focus on causes and consequences of depression. Focus on problems matches discrepancy-based accounts suggesting that unresolved problems underlie rumination (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999; Martin & Tesser, 1996).

We hypothesised that negative affect would be associated with (i) negative events that were reported concurrently and (ii) prior negative events that were reported at the previous occasion. Second, we hypothesized that negative affect would be predicted by momentary ruminative self-focus at the previous occasion. Third, because emotionally negative events tend to induce ruminative self-focus (Wood, Saltzberg, & Goldsamt, 1990), we hypothesized that ruminative self-focus would partially mediate the association between prior negative events and negative affect. Fourth, informed by RST, we hypothesised that trait rumination would moderate the association between negative events and negative affect such that high trait ruminators would report more negative affect after negative events than low trait ruminators. However, on the basis of previous findings, we did not expect levels of depressive symptomatology to moderate the association between negative events and negative affect.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the University of Exeter and the local area using e-mails and newspaper advertisements. We requested volunteers for a study on sad moods and depression, although we made it clear that participants did not have to be

depressed to take part. Thus, as intended, we obtained a sample with a wide range of depressive symptomatology as assessed on the Beck Depression Inventory-II (range = 0–37, $M = 15.4$, $SD = 9.2$). One hundred and thirty-nine persons (100 women) initially consented to take part (range = 18–67 years, $M = 26.8$, $SD = 13.3$). Most (107) were university students, the remainder were community adults. Data from a subset of these participants examining the direct relationship between negative affect and ruminative self-focus were previously reported by Moberly and Watkins (2008). Participants were paid £10 (\$20) for completing the study.

Measures

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II)

The BDI-II assesses levels of depressive symptomatology with 21 items that are rated on a scale from 0 to 3, with higher scores reflecting more depressive symptoms (range = 0–63) (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). Cronbach's alpha for our sample was 0.90.

Response Styles Questionnaire–Ruminative Responses Scale (RSQ)

The RSQ assesses the extent to which individuals respond to depressed mood by focusing on self, symptoms and on the causes and consequences of their mood (trait rumination), using 22 items rated on a 4-point frequency scale (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). Cronbach's alpha for our sample was 0.91.

Procedure

We used ESM to assess negative affect, ruminative self-focus and negative events eight times daily over seven days. Participants rated their moods and thinking styles when signalled by an alarm from a wrist-worn actiwatch (Cambridge Neurotechnology Ltd., Cambridge, UK). Each participant's day was divided into eight equal periods so that one alarm occurred at a random time within each period, and no two alarms occurred within 15 min. We sampled eight times daily to capture a range of psychological states across sufficient time points to enable sensitivity to changes in time and setting, without over-burdening the participant, as typical of similar experience-sampling studies (Marco & Suls, 1993). This resulted in a 12 hr daily sampling period with one alarm occurring within each of eight 90 min periods (e.g., 10.00–22.00). Times were individually randomised for each participant to suit their typical waking hours (actual range = 07.00–23.59).

At each alarm, a flashing letter on an LED display prompted participants to enter a rating for the moment before the alarm sounded, by pressing a button on the actiwatch to cycle through ratings from 1 to 7. After each rating was entered, the next letter was displayed and the participant made the next rating. The actiwatch only accepted entries within 20 s of each alarm, ensuring all data were entered promptly. Participants recorded their levels of sadness (S), anxiety (N), and irritation (I), and the extent to which they were focusing on their feelings (F) and focusing on their problems (P) on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). During the study, participants carried a card on their person to remind them of the meaning of these prompts.

Participants received separate booklets for each day of the study. Each booklet included eight experience-sampling forms, each of which corresponded to an actiwatch alarm. Spaces were provided for participants to record (a) time and date of form completion, and (b) elapsed time since the alarm. Printed below was the question: 'Since the last beep, have you experienced an event that made you feel negative emotions?', which participants answered by circling either 'Yes' or 'No' and writing down a brief description of the event if it occurred. Scales were provided on which participants could rate the extent to which they felt *sad*, *anxious*, and *irritable when the*

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