

The role of urgency in maladaptive behaviors

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Abstract

Prior work on maladaptive behaviors has cited impulsivity as a risk factor. The concept of impulsivity, however, fails to address the potential role of negative affect in such behaviors. The UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale addresses this weakness by dividing impulsivity into four subscales: Urgency, Sensation Seeking, (lack of) Premeditation, and (lack of) Perseverance. We predicted that urgency, defined as the tendency, specifically in the face of negative affect, to act quickly and without planning, would predict elevations on three maladaptive behaviors—excessive reassurance seeking, drinking to cope, and bulimic symptoms as measured by the Eating Disorder Inventory—in both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses in an undergraduate sample ($N = 70$). Participants were assessed at two time points, 3–4 weeks apart. Urgency significantly predicted all three outcome variables cross-sectionally at both Time 1 and Time 2. Time 1 urgency significantly predicted Time 2 excessive reassurance seeking. Changes in urgency from Time 1 to Time 2 predicted changes in all three outcome variables. Results indicate a clear cross-sectional relationship between urgency and certain maladaptive behaviors. Additionally, some form of longitudinal relationship may exist between these variables, although the use of residual change scores precluded distinction between true change and change due to error.

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Introduction

Habitual use of maladaptive behaviors—actions for which cost outweighs benefit—is a defining feature of a host of psychological disorders, including depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse disorders (Bornovalova, Lejuez, Daughters, Rosenthal, & Lynch, 2005; Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2005; Fischer, Anderson, & Smith, 2004; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999; Keel & Mitchell, 1997). Although the harmful nature of such behavioral patterns is essentially undisputed, empirical findings regarding the risk factors and motivations behind them have not been quite as consistent. This study sought to address this void by examining the degree to which affect-driven impulsive tendencies predict the use of maladaptive behaviors, even when controlling for other aspects of impulsivity as well as a variety of affect-relevant variables.

Historically, the most frequently cited risk factor for maladaptive behaviors has been impulsivity. This relationship, however, is complicated by the fact that impulsivity itself is an extraordinarily broad construct

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defined differently across different studies (Lynam & Miller, 2004). Multiple conflicting definitions of impulsivity render comparisons across studies that utilize different measures of the construct essentially impossible, as the operational definition varies so widely. Each definition of impulsivity has a unique relationship with maladaptive behaviors that makes intuitive sense, but because the relationships differ from one another, grouping them together limits the degree to which subsequent results are interpretable. In other words, broad definitions of impulsivity ignore the possibility that particular forms of impulsivity are uniquely related to particular types of behaviors.

An additional problem with much of the current literature on impulsivity is that the popular definitions of the construct (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1977; Gray, 1970; Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995) fail to address the role of affect in general and negative affect in particular. Although not every individual who experiences negative affect feels compelled to immediately act in an effort to diminish their negative emotions, numerous studies have reported findings that indicate many such individuals ultimately develop maladaptive behavioral patterns (Brown, Lejuez, Kahler, & Strong, 2002; Lejuez, Daughters, Hernandez, Kosson, & Lynch, 2005).

In response to the lack of clarity in the impulsivity literature, a new conceptualization of the construct has emerged in the work of Whiteside and Lynam (2001), through which they have created the now widely used Urgency, (lack of) Premeditation, (lack of) Perseverance, and Sensation Seeking (UPPS) Impulsive Behavior Scale. The UPPS divides impulsivity into four separate categories, each of which is operationalized as an individual difference variable, and the structure of the scale has been confirmed by subsequent factor analysis (Lynam & Miller, 2004).

The Urgency subscale measures an individual's tendency to act quickly and without planning, specifically in the face of negative affect. This subscale thus directly addresses the role of emotion in impulsive behaviors and has been linked to a variety of maladaptive behavioral outcomes. These outcomes include early marijuana use in men, tension reduction alcohol consumption motives, bulimic symptoms as measured by the Bulimia Test-Revised (BULIT-R; Thelen, Farmer, Wonderlich, & Smith, 1991), binge eating, general eating problems, hostile attributional style in both genders, and aggression (Fischer et al., 2004; Fischer, Smith, & Anderson, 2003; Lynam & Miller, 2004; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003). Additionally, in a study involving 146 White female eating disorder patients in an inpatient setting, Claes et al. (2005) found that patients with bulimia nervosa (BN) exhibited elevated UPPS-Urgency scores relative to restricting anorexia nervosa patients and more similar scores relative to binge-purge anorexia nervosa patients, thus indicating a unique relationship between one factor of impulsivity and a particular type of maladaptive behavioral pattern.

Problematic outcomes precipitated by the drive to reduce negative affect extend into the realm of interpersonal behaviors as well. Coyne's (1976) theory of depression proposed that dysphoric individuals excessively seek reassurance from others in a counter-productive effort to reduce their own negative self-images. Such excessive reassurance seeking has been found to be a potential contributory cause of major depression (Joiner et al., 1999). Here again, a maladaptive behavioral outcome capable of contributing to the development of psychopathology can be linked to a potential role for the drive to immediately reduce negative affect.

The above-mentioned behaviors may, at first glance, appear to be fairly disparate in nature; however, a common link binds them together as outcomes of a powerful risk factor: the inability to effectively manage or weather the experience of negative affect. Overwhelmed by negative emotions and desperate to immediately reduce such threatening affective sensations, certain individuals appear at risk to engage in one or several behaviors from this broad list. The potential role for urgency in such maladaptive behavioral patterns was also highlighted by the findings of Whiteside, Lynam, Miller, and Reynolds (2005), who found that UPPS-Urgency is significantly related to borderline personality disorder (BPD) features as measured by the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI; Morey, 1991).

To further examine this potential relationship, we developed a study that required individuals to answer questions regarding their methods for managing emotions as well as the degree to which they engage in various maladaptive behaviors. Participants answered these questions on two separate occasions, separated by 3–4 weeks. Due to issues of feasibility, not every maladaptive behavior could be assessed; however, we utilized a range of behaviors that have clear phenotypic differences from one another in an effort to demonstrate the generalizability of the hypothesized relationships. Although other research has already pointed towards urgency as an important variable in certain maladaptive behaviors, this study maintains incremental validity

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