



Thoughts, images, and appraisals associated with acting and not acting on the urge to self-injure



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this study was to examine the frequency, content, and appraisals of thoughts and images occurring during urges to engage in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI).

Method: Undergraduates (N = 154) with a history of NSSI completed an online survey of their thoughts, images, and appraisals when they acted on urges to engage in NSSI as well as when they resisted urges to self-injure.

Results: Most (>90%) participants reported experiencing both thoughts and images during urges to engage in NSSI. During urges that resulted in self-injury, self-critical and hopeless thoughts were most distressing, and thoughts about relief from emotional distress were most comforting. Images of the anticipated injury were most common. During urges that did not result in self-injury themes of the futility of NSSI, positive self-talk, and the impact on others were most common. Images were most frequently of the negative impact on self and others, and the anticipated injury. Appraisals encouraging NSSI occurred when individuals did and did not act on their urges, but concurrent strong discouraging appraisals appeared to be protective on occasions when urges did not result in self-injury.

Limitations: Retrospective self-report was used to assess cognitive content. Generalisability of findings to non-student samples needs to be assessed.

Conclusions: Findings from this study may inform comprehensive assessment of thoughts and images associated with urges to engage in NSSI. NSSI interventions may need to promote thoughts, imagery and appraisals that discourage NSSI whilst simultaneously modifying cognitions that encourage NSSI.

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1. Non-suicidal self-injury

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is defined as the deliberate destruction of bodily tissue without suicidal intent (Nock, 2009), and includes behaviours such as cutting, carving, burning flesh, and banging or hitting oneself. NSSI is primarily a means of coping with intense emotions in the absence of more adaptive emotion regulation strategies, and has been shown to be associated with anxiety, depression, and suicidal behaviour (Hasking, Momeni, Swannell, & Chia, 2008; Klonsky, 2007, 2009; Muehlenkamp et al., 2009; Whitlock et al., 2013). NSSI is most prevalent in adolescents and young adults (Muehlenkamp, Claes, Havertape, & Plener, 2012; Swannell, Martin, Page, Hasking, & St John, 2014), and appears

particularly prevalent in university populations (Whitlock, Eckenrode, & Silverman, 2006). Given the adverse outcomes for youth who engage in these behaviours, and the significant burden on those who self-injure and their families and friends, prevention and early intervention is critical.

There is currently a lack of empirically validated treatments for NSSI (Glenn, Franklin, & Nock, 2015; Washburn et al., 2012). Notable exceptions include a 9-week Treatment for Self-Injurious Behaviours (T-SIB), which has demonstrated promise in an early open trial (Andover, Schatten, Morris, & Miller, 2015), and an Emotion Regulation Group Therapy, which has primarily demonstrated efficacy in women with borderline personality disorder (Gratz, Bardeen, Levy, Dixon-Gordon, & Tull, 2015). A recent systematic review suggests cognitive-behavioural treatments are “probably efficacious” in treating NSSI (Glenn et al., 2015; also; Muehlenkamp, 2006), but they are typically not aimed at self-injury (Klonsky, 2007; Washburn et al., 2012). All reviews conclude that more needs to be done to develop effective

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treatments for NSSI and to identify mediators and moderators of treatment outcome (Glenn et al., 2015; Turner, Austin, & Chapman, 2014; Washburn et al., 2012). One potential pathway to developing more effective and targeted cognitive interventions is by improving our understanding of the content of the verbal thoughts and images that occur in the context of NSSI, and how these cognitions are appraised. Importantly, the content of thoughts and images may differ during urges to engage in NSSI that are acted upon than those where the individual can resist these urges, providing potentially important information about specific cognitions that increase and reduce the risk of NSSI that can then guide more targeted interventions.

2. NSSI thoughts and imagery

Recent research has examined various thoughts in the context of NSSI, such as suicidal and non-suicidal thoughts (Nock, Prinstein, & Sterba, 2010), binge-purge thoughts (Shingleton et al., 2013), and ruminative thoughts (Voon, Hasking, & Martin, 2014c). Theoretically, rumination is thought to intensify the experience of negative emotions, generating an ‘emotional cascade’ that NSSI serves to interrupt (Selby & Joiner, 2009). However, research thus far has focused on the process of repetitive negative thinking rather than the content of thoughts. Identifying specific thoughts that occur during urges to engage in NSSI, and differentiating between thoughts associated with acting on the urge versus not acting on the urge, could assist clinicians to identify and modify thoughts associated with an increased risk and promote thoughts associated with a reduced risk.

Importantly, emotion research comparing verbal thoughts to imagery has demonstrated that imagery is more emotionally evocative and has stronger links to affect (Holmes & Mathews, 2010). For example, Holmes and colleagues found that imagining oneself in negative and positive scenarios is associated with more intense negative and positive affect, respectively, compared to focusing on the words and meanings (Holmes & Mathews, 2005; Holmes, Lang, & Shah, 2009). Psychophysiological and neuroanatomical research has also found that images are more potent than verbal thoughts at triggering emotional responses because they share similar neural mechanisms as the perceptual experiences one obtains from direct sensory experiences (Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001; McTeague & Lang, 2012). Imagery is also a stronger predictor of future behaviour than verbal thoughts (Libby, Schaeffer, Eibach, & Slemmer, 2007). Ng, Di Simplicio, McManus, Kennerley, and Holmes (2016) found that suicidal individuals reported ‘flash-forwards’ imagery (i.e., similar to flashback imagery in PTSD, but instead involving future-oriented imagery) of the suicidal act and its consequences whereas non-suicidal individuals did not. Importantly, suicidal individuals with flash-forwards imagery also reported more severe suicidal ideation than individuals without flash-forwards imagery, and resolution of flash-forward imagery was associated with resolution of suicidal ideation. Similarly, there is evidence that NSSI imagery is associated with NSSI enactment (Baker & Lewis, 2013). Thus it is important to better understand both thoughts and images during urges to engage in NSSI. However, research into mental imagery that occurs in the context of NSSI has been very limited, despite recent findings suggesting that imagery-based techniques could be helpful for treating NSSI (Kress, Adamson, Demarco, Paylo, & Zoldan, 2013). In sum, no previous study has examined the content of thoughts and images during urges that do and do not precede NSSI, and this knowledge could be important to developing more effective treatments for NSSI.

3. Appraisals of thoughts and images

Appraisal models emphasise the therapeutic importance of focusing on the *meanings* individuals give to thoughts and images in determining emotional, behavioural, and physiological sequelae (Salkovskis, 1985; Wells, 2008). Such models suggest that negative automatic thoughts and images will only impact on affect and behaviour to the extent that they are appraised in unhelpful ways. Consistent with this proposition, the ability to cognitively reappraise emotional stimuli has repeatedly been associated with reduced risk of NSSI, and less severe NSSI among people who do self-injure (e.g. Andrews, Martin, Hasking, & Page, 2013; Richmond, Hasking, & Meaney, 2017; Voon, Hasking, & Martin, 2014a,b; Voon et al., 2014c).

Flash-forwards imagery of future suicidal behaviour can be both comforting and distressing (Crane, Shah, Barnhofer, & Holmes, 2012; Gregory, Brewin, Mansell, & Donaldson, 2010; Hales, Deeptose, Goodwin, & Holmes, 2011; Holmes, Crane, Fennell, & Williams, 2007). Crane et al. (2012) found on some occasions the meanings associated with imagery acted as a deterrent to suicidal behaviour, suggesting that some imagery appraisals may be protective. It is possible that flash-forwards imagery concerning NSSI operates in a similar way, acting as a powerful deterrent from engaging in NSSI on some occasions. Therefore, it is important to consider not just the content of the thoughts and images that occur during urges to engage in NSSI, but also how this cognitive content is appraised. If an individual experiences images that have previously triggered the urge to engage in NSSI (e.g., of the injury itself), and subsequently appraises these images as uncontrollable unless acted upon, they may be more likely to act on the urge to self-injure. In contrast, if an individual appraises the same images as a reminder of the futility of self-injury, they may be less likely to act on the urge to self-injure. Improving our understanding of thoughts, images, and appraisals associated with acting versus not acting on urges to self-injure will inform future experimental and clinical studies, which can then target these cognitions in an attempt to reduce NSSI urges and behaviour.

4. The current study

The first aim of the current study was to explore thoughts and images during urges to engage in NSSI, both at times when individuals act on the urge and occasions when they do not act on the urge. Specifically we explored the frequency of verbal thoughts and images, how distressing or comforting they were considered by participants, and how they related to the strength of the urge to self-injure. The second aim was to identify themes in the content of the thoughts and images that accompany an urge to self-injure on occasions when individuals act on the urge and occasions when they do not act on the urge. Finally, the third aim was to explore whether thoughts and images were appraised differently when participants acted on the urge to self-injure and when they did not. Given the novelty of this work, and the paucity of prior work exploring specific thoughts and images related to NSSI, we refrained from proposing specific hypotheses.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants (N = 154) were university students from a single Australian metropolitan university (122 female and 32 male) who endorsed a lifetime history of NSSI. This population was

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