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The relationship between thought suppression and smoking cessation[☆]

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Abstract

Intrusive thoughts (e.g., anxiety, depression, substance use) are among the most salient symptoms of clinical problems. Therefore, methods of thought suppression have received considerable attention. However, some studies have found that attempts to suppress thoughts precipitate an increase in thoughts. In the case of substance abuse, such thoughts could serve as cues for further use. This study examined the association between thought suppression and quitting smoking in a sample of current and ex-smokers. Using the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI), scores were obtained for participants' level of thought suppression. Based on the idea that a greater tendency to suppress thoughts would make quitting smoking more difficult, it was hypothesized that unsuccessful quitters would have higher WBSI scores than smokers who had successfully quit. It was found that mean scores on the WBSI were significantly higher ($P < .05$) for smokers than ex-smokers. These findings suggest that a tendency toward thought suppression may increase the likelihood that attempts to quit smoking will be unsuccessful. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Intrusive thoughts are an important feature of several clinical disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (e.g., Salkovskis & Campbell, 1994; Wenzlaff, Wegner, & Roper, 1988). Consequently, thought suppression has become an area of substantial research. Paradoxically, suppression of intrusive thoughts has been related to

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higher levels of intrusive thoughts compared to monitoring thoughts without attempting to suppress them (Wegner, 1994, 1997; Wegner & Erber, 1992; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). To explain this paradoxical effect, Wegner (1994, 1997) has suggested that there are two types of cognitive processes that combine to yield mental control. One is a purposeful search for thoughts in order to produce a desired state of mind. The second is a concurrent monitoring process that automatically searches for thoughts and signals a failure to produce a desired state of mind. In other words, the monitoring process checks that the desired state has been achieved and, if it has, continues to monitor the mental state. However, in times of distraction, stress, time urgency, or during other occasions that reduce cognitive capacity, the purposeful search may not produce the desired state of mind, and thus the monitoring process begins to signal the lack of a desired state. By continually searching for indications of the desired state, the monitoring process elicits thoughts that one is attempting to avoid. In essence, in an attempt to gain control over one's thoughts, individuals may cause the state of mind that they are trying to avoid (Wegner, 1994, 1997).

An increase in thought frequency as a consequence of trying to suppress previously inhibited thoughts has been reported in several studies (Wegner et al., 1987; Wenzlaff et al., 1988). However, the conditions that lead to an increase in intrusive thoughts as a result of attempted thought suppression are unclear. Some researchers have found an increase in thought frequency immediately when thought suppression is attempted (Lavy & van den Hout, 1990; Merckelbach, Muris, van den Hout, & de Jong, 1991; Muris, Merckelbach, & de Jong, 1993), while others have found that intrusive thoughts can be reduced, but a "rebound" of intrusive thoughts occurs following active suppression (Clark, Ball, & Pape, 1991; Clark, Winton, & Thynn, 1993; Davies & Clark, 1998; Wegner et al., 1987).

Very little is known about thought suppression and its association with substance abuse. Learning theory, however, would predict that intrusive thoughts will impair recovery or precipitate relapse in substance abusers to the extent that thoughts are stimuli for substance use (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985). Intrusive thoughts may also be interpreted as cravings or urges for the substance, thereby leading to use.

Palfai, Monti, Colby, and Rohsenow (1997) found that thought suppression in heavy social drinkers was associated with heightened accessibility to alcohol-related information. In a related study, Palfai, Monti, Colby, and Rohsenow (1997) found that participants who had attempted to suppress urges to drink alcohol showed more intense smoking behavior (a behavior often associated with drinking), as measured by the number of cigarette puffs, than participants who had only monitored their urges. Salkovskis and Reynolds (1994) studied individuals who reported difficulty in controlling smoking related intrusive thoughts and found that thought suppression was associated with more frequent thought intrusions.

Clearly, based on the literature, the inhibition of intrusive thoughts in substance abusers would be clinically useful, but how best to achieve such an inhibition is not yet known. Haaga and Allison (1994) found that cognitive coping skills for reframing high risk situations were more effective than thought suppression in predicting a greater likelihood of maintained nonsmoking.

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