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PERCEIVED FUNCTIONS OF WORRY AMONG GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER SUBJECTS: DISTRACTION FROM MORE EMOTIONALLY DISTRESSING TOPICS?

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Summary — Theories regarding worry have discussed both adaptive and maladaptive functions. The present study used rating scales of the six reasons for worry commonly reported by generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) clients to explore subjective perceptions of the functions of worry held by college student worriers meeting self-reported criteria for GAD and by control subjects. Subjects rated motivation, preparation for the worst, and avoidance/prevention of negative outcomes as the most typical reasons for their worry. However, the GAD group was discriminated from other comparison groups particularly by high ratings of “distraction from more emotional topics” as a reason for their worry.

Given the widespread prevalence of worry in both normal and clinical groups (cf. Davey & Tallis, 1994), determining its functions has become a research area of high priority. Early theorizing proposed that worry involves attempts at problem-solving in order to prevent the occurrence of negative events or to devise coping strategies in case such events should occur; however, these attempts are largely unsuccessful, and the worrying produces significant additional disadvantages (Borkovec, 1985; Mathews, 1990). For example, the avoidant nature of worry results in interference with elaboration of the associative network (Mathews, 1990), and worry process suppresses somatic activation, resulting in some initial relief but also in interference with emotional processing and the maintenance of anxious meaning (Borkovec, 1994). On the other hand, Davey, Hampton, Farrel and Davidson (1992) have more recently suggested that worry can provide positive functions: worry can be associated with adaptive, problem-focused, coping strategies and an information-seeking cognitive style; thus the process can be preparational and

motivational rather than merely avoidant and interfering.

Importantly, emphasis on possible adaptive functions for worry has stemmed from research on normal subjects, whereas identification of the maladaptive effects of worry has come from studies of chronically anxious groups. It may still be the case, however, that worry does provide some adaptive advantages for the anxious individual. Informal questioning of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) clients during a therapy outcome investigation revealed six commonly offered reasons for why they worried, and these included both potentially adaptive and maladaptive functions: (a) motivation to get tasks done, (b) general problem-solving, (c) preparation for the worst, (d) planning ways to avoid negative events, (e) distraction from more emotional thoughts, and (f) superstitious effects on the perceived likelihood of future events. The present study attempted to determine by more systematic means which reasons were most typical of individuals with GAD for whom worry is the central problem and which reasons, if any,

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discriminated GAD subjects from other anxious subjects and from nonanxious subjects. Thus, a measure using the above six reasons to worry was constructed and administered to groups of college students who either met or did not meet all diagnostic criteria for GAD in order to answer these two questions.

Study 1

Method

Subjects and Procedure

In a pilot study, 69 introductory psychology students (gender unspecified) completed a questionnaire packet which included the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Questionnaire (GAD-Q), a self-report measure of DSM-III-R and DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1987; 1994) diagnostic criteria for GAD. This measure has been found to identify to a fairly accurate degree people with diagnosable GAD and to a very accurate degree people without GAD (Roemer, Borkovec, Posa & Borkovec, 1991).

Based on their response to the GAD-Q, subjects were classified GAD ($N = 10$) by DSM-III-R criteria: (a) unrealistic or excessive worry, (b) worry about two or more topics, (c) being bothered by worry more days than not over the

past 6 months, and (d) six or more of 18 associated symptoms of GAD. Subjects were classified Nonanxious ($N = 36$) if they did not meet criteria (a), (c), or (d). Subjects who met either (a), (c) or (d) but not all three were classified Partial GAD ($N = 23$).

All subjects completed the Reasons To Worry Questionnaire, consisting of the six possible reasons to worry suggested by theory and by reports of our former GAD clients:

"Worry helps to motivate me to get things done that I need to get done." (Motivation)

"Worrying is an effective way to problem-solve." (Problem-solving)

"If I worry about something, when something bad does happen, I'll be better prepared for it." (Preparation)

"If I worry about something, I am more likely to actually figure out how to avoid or prevent something bad from happening." (Avoidance/Prevention)

"Worrying about most of the things I worry about is a way to distract myself from worrying about even more emotional things, things that I don't want to think about." (Distraction from more Emotional Topics)

"Although it may not actually be true, it feels like if I worry about something, the worrying makes it less likely that something bad will happen." (Superstition)

Subjects were asked to rate the degree to which each statement represented a reason for why they worried on 1–5 point Likert scales ("not at all" to "very much").

Results

Table 1 provides the means and standard

Table 1

Means (and Standard Deviations) of Reasons to Worry Ratings for GAD, Partial GAD and Nonanxious Subjects from Study 1

Reason	GAD Status			Total Group
	GAD ($N = 10$)	Partial-GAD ($N = 23$)	Nonanxious ($N = 36$)	
Motivation	3.40 (1.43)	2.82 (1.40)	2.86 (1.40)	2.93 (1.40)
Problem-solving	2.00 (1.33)	2.22 (1.24)	2.11 (1.90)	2.13 (1.20)
Preparation	3.60 (1.34)	2.78 (1.28)	2.81 (1.14)	2.91 (1.23)
Avoidance	3.60 (1.17)	2.91 (1.08)	2.67 (1.17)	2.88 (1.17)
Distraction	2.40 (1.07)	1.87 (1.14)	1.47 (0.84)	1.74 (1.02)
Superstition	2.30 (0.94)	2.35 (1.43)	1.95 (1.10)	2.13 (1.20)

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