

Predicting Cognitive and Social Consequences of Emotional Episodes: The Contribution of Emotional Intensity, the Five Factor Model, and Alexithymia

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Emotional events are followed by recurrent thoughts (rumination) and talking about the event (social sharing of emotion). Factors that can account for variations in these consequences were examined (emotional intensity, the Five Factor Model, and two factors of alexithymia). In two samples, participants reported the most negative emotional event of recent months and in one sample also reported the most positive one. Results indicated that emotional intensity predicted social sharing and rumination, while neuroticism was positively related to intrusive thoughts about negative events and extraversion to rumination and social sharing about positive events. Difficulty describing feelings was negatively related to social sharing for negative events and reduced fantasy to rumination for positive events. © 2000 Academic Press

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Major emotional episodes like trauma (such as catastrophes, war, or torture) and negative life events (such as sudden death of a close person, serious accident, or invalidity) elicit rumination. Rumination consists of thoughts, memories, or mental images related to the event that repetitively surface into consciousness (Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996; Tait & Silver, 1989). Rumination is generally considered as resulting from the sudden disruption that such events bring about in the person's subjective world. According to some (Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996), rumination originates in the disruption of goal-oriented processes. According to others (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Silver & Wortman, 1980; Tait & Silver, 1989), rumination should rather be attributed to a sudden invalidation of the individual's basic beliefs and to a threat to the self-concept. To illustrate, such mental recollections were reported by 85% of survivors of a hotel disaster (Wilkinson, 1983) and by 74% of survivors of a factory fire in Norway (Weisaeth, 1989).

Laboratory research using emotion-inducing movies (for a review, see Horowitz, 1992) has demonstrated that such cognitive consequences are not restricted to traumatic situations. Thus, for instance, participants were exposed either to a movie depicting genital injuries in adolescent circumcision rituals or to a neutral control movie (Horowitz, 1969; Horowitz & Becker, 1971). Those who had seen the emotional movie evidenced such recurrent memories significantly more frequently than those who were exposed to the neutral movie. Horowitz and Becker (1973) replicated these findings when positive emotions were elicited. Research based on volunteers' reports of a recent autobiographic episode in which they experienced emotion confirmed results obtained in the laboratory. More than 95% of the respondents reported having had recurrent thoughts about the emotional episode in the hours or days that followed it (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991; for a review, see Rimé, Philippot, Mesquita, & Boca, 1992). A considerable proportion of them mentioned that they have had such thoughts often or very often. This occurred irrespective of the type of emotion involved. Overall, there is evidence that emotion elicits cognitive consequences that take the form of rumination.

Rumination following an emotion is usually paralleled by a social consequence. Clinical observations of survivors of traumatic situations often mention their need to talk (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Marris, 1958; Silver & Wortman, 1980). As stated by Janoff-Bulman (1992, p. 108): "For some survivors, there is a seemingly insatiable need to talk about what happened, to tell people about their experience. It is as if they feel coerced into talking. There is still a sense of having the traumatic event forced into consciousness, and this persistent need to talk, like intrusive recollections, is a sign of 'in-

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