Why Thought Stopping Doesn't Work (And the Paradoxical Strategy That Might Work Better)

Description

Have you ever found yourself struggling to suppress a negative thought?

Like, maybe you're making a recording, and things are going well, and you find yourself trying your darnedest to avoid thinking about the really tricky shift coming up?

Or maybe you're warming up on the morning of an audition, and trying really hard to stop worrying about getting dry mouth?

Or perhaps you're on a road trip, and desperately trying to avoid thinking about Niagara Falls and Mountain Dew, because you really have to go – but the next rest stop isn't for another 26 miles…

Whatever the situation, you've probably heard that trying to suppress a thought only makes it more likely that you'll have more thoughts about that very thought. Which is often illustrated with the "white bear challenge" – where someone tells you *not* to think about a white bear, and then you see how long you can go before the white bear pops into your head.

And sure, that certainly sounds reasonable – but is there any truth to this? Like, is there any actual evidence that trying to suppress a particular thought leads to more thoughts about that thought? And if so, what are we supposed to do instead, if we want to minimize negative thoughts or worries, and stay in a more positive mental headspace?

There's a study about that!

Believe it or not, there's a study that explores this very question – and even uses the white bear!

A team of researchers (Wegner et al., 1987) recruited 54 undergraduate students, who were randomly assigned to one of three groups – a **suppression** group, an **expression** group, and a **focused distraction** group.

Participants in each group were asked to spend several 5-minute sessions describing "everything that comes to mind" to a tape recorder (ha! remember those? – if you think the audio quality of your phone's recordings is bad, here's a great 6-minute video that will remind you how awful tape recorder recordings sounded).

Suppression

After participants' first recording session, the experimenter gave the **suppression** group the following instructions:

> *"In the next five minutes, please verbalize your thoughts as you did before, with one exception. This time, try not to think of a white bear. Every time you say "white bear" or have "white bear" come to mind, though, please ring the bell on the table before you."*

When the five minutes were up, the experimenter popped back in and asked participants to repeat the exercise, but this time they were given permission to actively "try to think of a white bear" and again ring the bell whenever the thought came to mind.

Expression

The **expression** group went through the same series of 5-minute recording sessions, but their instructions were flip-flopped. Where they were asked to think of a white bar for one five-minute session, and then asked to try *not* to think of a white bear in their next recording session.

Focused distraction

The **focused distraction** group were given instructions similar to the **suppression** group, except that their instructions included this one little add-on:

> *"Also, if you happen to think of a white bear, please try to think of a red Volkswagen instead."*

The idea being, maybe having a specific replacement thought to think about would help them shift their thoughts away from the white bear a little quicker.

So…what happened? Was trying *not* to think of a white bear an effective thought suppression strategy?

Results

The findings were kind of intriguing.

What's up with those white bears?

One thing they found, was that we do indeed suck at trying *not* to think of white bears. On average, participants thought of a white bear ~6 times, in a 5-minute span.

A rebound effect?

However, there was a significant difference between the suppression and expression groups in terms of how often the white bear popped into their thoughts. Both when they were asked to *avoid* thinking about a white bear, and when they were given permission *to* think about a white bear.

Ok…so…what does that mean exactly, and why does it matter?

The numbers

So here are the numbers:

The **suppression** group was asked to *suppress* all thoughts of a white bear first, yet still reported **9.17** white bear thoughts in the 5-minute session. And when they were *allowed* to think about white bears in the next 5-minute session, they reported a whopping **34.05** white bear thoughts.

Conversely, the **expression** group was asked to actively think of white bears first, yet reported only **15.47** white bear thoughts (vs. 34.05). And when they were then asked to *suppress* all white bear thoughts, they reported just **4.13** white bear thoughts (vs. 9.17).

So in each 5-minute session, both when asked to avoid white bear thoughts and when given permission to think about white bears, the **expression** group reported experiencing significantly fewer thoughts of a white bear. The only difference between the groups being the *order* in which they were asked to suppress their thoughts.

Which suggests that there may be something of a “rebound” effect. Where trying to suppress a thought, could indeed lead to an increase in those thoughts once you stop actively trying to suppress them.

Whereas allowing yourself to engage with the thoughts for a time first, and *then* trying to suppress them seems to make the suppression more effective.

Which reminded me of the research on expressive writing and test anxiety.

Eh?

Expressive writing

You can read more about the performance benefits of expressive writing in this post from a while back (How to Clear Your Mind of Worries Before a Big Performance), but the gist, is that text-anxious students who wrote down their worries and negative thoughts 10 minutes before an exam scored half a letter grade higher than students who didn’t write out their worries.

Which seems to mirror the results of the white bear study, no?

It makes me wonder if maybe these two findings are related in some way. Where instead of trying really hard to suppress one's worries and negative thoughts in the leadup to a performance and paradoxically experiencing an explosion of negative thoughts during the performance itself, it might actually be easier to stay in a more positive headspace and suppress negative thoughts onstage, if you've allowed yourself a bit of time to actively engage in your worries and doubts in advance.

Take action

It does sound like a pretty backwards sort of thing to do, but maybe worth a try, the next time you have a relatively low-stakes performance situation to experiment with? A studio class or mock audition for a trusted friend might be a perfect time to try out something like this.

In any case, if you do give it a try, or have already experimented with something along these lines, I'd love to hear about your experience!

References

Wegner, Daniel M.; Schneider, David J.; Carter, Samuel R.; White, Teri L. (1987). *Paradoxical effects of thought suppression.. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53(1), 5–13.* doi:10.1037/0022-3514.53.1.5

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