



Research report

The role of impulsivity in the relationship between anxiety and suicidal ideation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 February 2012

Accepted 1 May 2012

Available online 25 August 2012

Keywords:

Anxiety

Looming cognitive style

Impulsivity

Time perception

Depression

Suicidal ideation

ABSTRACT

Background: The purpose of the present study was to examine the degree to which trait and cognitive (looming cognitive style) measures of anxiety are associated with suicidal ideation (SI), as well as whether trait and cognitive (time misperception) measures of impulsivity moderate the association between these variables.

Methods: The sample included 100 undergraduate students (72% female) who completed the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Looming Maladaptive Style Questionnaire, Barratt Impulsiveness Scale, Time Paradigm Version 1.0 Task, Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation, and the Brief Symptom Inventory.

Results: Trait anxiety and looming cognitive style were found to be positively associated with SI. Further, both trait impulsivity and time misperception moderated the association between these variables and SI, but in a different manner. Consistent with study hypotheses, among those *high* in trait anxiety, greater overestimation of time was associated with a higher likelihood of SI. Contrary to study hypotheses, among those *low* in trait anxiety, high trait impulsivity was associated with a greater likelihood of SI. The same pattern of results was found when looming cognitive style served as the independent variable.

Limitations: The use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to determine the temporal relationship of the study variables. Further, the sample included predominantly Caucasian undergraduates and thus study results may not generalize to other populations.

Conclusions: Clinically, results suggest that high trait anxiety, looming cognitive style, time misperception, and trait impulsivity may be important risk factors for SI among college students and thus should be assessed when students present for treatment. Treatments that focus on problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and affect regulation strategies may help decrease anxiety and impulsivity, which in turn may help reduce the likelihood of suicidal thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Suicide is a significant public health problem, particularly for the college student population. Among college students, suicide is the second leading cause of death (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Approximately 6.1% of college students have seriously considered attempting suicide, 1.3% made a non-lethal attempt, and nearly 1100 students commit suicide on college campuses each year (American College Health Association, 2009). During this transitional period in development, stressors such as low social support, interpersonal conflicts, academic pressure, financial worries, and psychiatric illness may put college students at risk for suicidal ideation and behavior (American College

Health Association, 2009; Drum et al., 2009; Wilcox et al., 2010; Hess et al., 2011). Suicidal ideation (SI) is one of the strongest predictors of suicidal behavior, as it precedes most suicide attempts and predicts both attempts and completions (Kachur et al., 1995; Lewinsohn et al., 1996; Beck et al., 1999; Brown et al., 2000; Borges et al., 2008). As such, suicidal ideation is an important area of study among college students, as well as the general population.

One relatively well studied risk factor for suicidal ideation and behavior is the presence of anxiety. Many recent studies suggest that anxiety disorders, as well as anxiety symptoms, increase risk for suicide attempts (Khan et al., 2002; Sareen et al., 2005; Boden et al., 2007; Bolton et al., 2008; Cougle et al., 2009). Specifically, the presence of “any anxiety disorder” increases risk for suicidal ideation and attempts in the general population, even after controlling for comorbid psychiatric disorders (Sareen et al., 2005; Boden et al., 2007). Similarly, general and trait measures

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of anxiety symptoms have been associated with suicidal ideation and/or attempts even after controlling for depression (Chioquetta and Stiles, 2003; Diefenbach et al., 2009; Ohring et al., 1996).

Though not yet empirically studied to date, it is also possible that cognitive measures of anxiety, such as looming cognitive style, are associated with suicidal ideation (Riskind et al., 2000a). Looming cognitive style refers to the tendency to generate elaborate mental scenarios of rapidly rising risk of feared situations (Riskind, 1997; Riskind et al., 2000b). It has been tested in relation to numerous feared stimuli (e.g., romantic rejections, germs, spiders, automobiles) and found to underlie many types of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder (Riskind and Williams, 2005; Riskind and Rector, 2007; Tolin et al., 2004). Thus, it may not only be the presence of worry about feared situations, but the belief that these situations are actively intensifying in danger, that increases risk for suicidal thinking.

Consistent with this research, Baumeister (1990) suggests that anxiety plays an important role in suicidal thinking and behavior. According to Baumeister's (1990) escape theory of suicide, suicide is motivated by an attempt to escape from negative self-awareness caused by setbacks or disappointments that are attributed to the self. In an attempt to reduce negative affect, a numb mental state results, which includes a reduction of inhibitions and an increased willingness to attempt suicide. The presence of anxiety exacerbates the need to escape by intensifying feelings of worry, guilt, and blame. This may be particularly likely to occur when feared stimuli are perceived to be increasing in intensity and danger (Riskind et al., 2000a).

However, not all individuals with anxiety report suicidal thinking. Baumeister's (1990) theory also suggests that anxiety may be most likely to precipitate suicidal thinking and behavior when a sense of urgency exists, caused in part by impulsive tendencies that are characterized by the overestimation of the duration of time intervals and a lack of inner restraint. According to Baumeister (1990), anxious "presuicidal" individuals who overestimate time intervals believe that they are stuck in a stressful or unbearable situation for longer than they actually are (e.g., overestimate that six minutes have passed when only four minutes have elapsed). Similarly, anxious individuals who lack inner restraint may be more likely to think about relatively quick and easily executable methods to escape stressful and unbearable situations (e.g., suicide versus therapy) without consideration of consequences. Thus, individuals with anxiety and impulsive tendencies or thinking may experience a particularly strong, unrestrained urge to escape their feared stimulus before their psychological pain escalates (Baumeister, 1990; Rector et al., 2008), thus precipitating suicidal thinking. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relation between different measures of anxiety (trait and looming cognitive style) and suicidal thinking, as well as whether impulsivity (trait and time overestimation) moderates this association.

Though not yet studied as a moderator of the association between anxiety and suicidal ideation, a fair amount of research suggests that trait impulsivity, defined as a personality trait or cognitive style typified by disinhibition and the tendency to respond or act quickly in response to urges or stimuli (Brodsky et al., 2001), is associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Connor et al. (2004) found impulsivity to be strongly associated with suicidal ideation among young adult males. Higher trait impulsivity has also been associated with greater suicidal intent among individuals who attempted suicide (Pompili et al., 2008), as well as predicting future suicidal acts in depressed patients (Oquendo et al., 2004) and their offspring (Melhem et al., 2007). A number of studies have also found that adults with a history of a suicide attempt report higher trait impulsivity than non-attempters (Corruble et al., 1999; Brodsky

et al., 2001; Maser et al., 2002). These results suggest that individuals with impulsive personality traits are more likely to engage in suicidal thinking and behavior.

Similar to trait impulsivity, time misperception may be associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Baumeister, 1990). Distorted time perception is a cognitive distortion that underlies impulsivity (Wittman and Paulus, 2008) and has been associated with other behavioral (e.g., Immediate Memory Task/Delayed Memory Task) (Dougherty and Marsh, 2002; Dougherty et al., 2002) and self-report measures of impulsivity (e.g., Barratt Impulsiveness Scale) (Barratt and Patton, 1983; Patton et al., 1995). Though not studied in direct relation to suicidal thoughts and behavior, distortions of time perception have been found among clinical samples that report engaging in self-harm behavior or suicidal thinking. Berlin and Rolls (2004) found that patients with borderline personality disorder significantly overestimated time intervals on a time perception task (e.g., guessing that 60 s have passed when only 45 s have elapsed) and reported higher trait impulsivity relative to controls. Similarly, Neuringer and Harris (1974) found that hospitalized individuals who reported suicidality significantly overestimated time intervals compared with inpatients who did not report suicidality.

In summary, according to Baumeister's (1990) theory, "presuicidal" individuals may experience significant trait anxiety, which increases their urge to escape from negative self-awareness through suicide. Similarly, Riskind et al. (2000a) and Rector et al. (2008) hypothesize that looming cognitive style accelerates the rate at which an anxious individual becomes hopeless and wishes to escape through suicide. Further, these theories suggest that those with trait anxiety and looming cognitive style may be at greatest risk for suicidal thinking and behavior when they possess impulsive tendencies, such as the tendency to overestimate time and develop quick and easily executable approaches to problems without consideration of consequences. These questions have not been tested in prior research.

Based on the aforementioned theories and prior empirical research, the following hypotheses are offered. First, we hypothesize that higher levels of trait anxiety and looming cognitive style will be associated with a greater likelihood of suicidal ideation. Second, among those with higher levels of trait anxiety, higher versus lower levels of trait impulsivity and time misperception (overestimation of time), will be associated with a greater likelihood of suicidal ideation. Third, among those with higher looming cognitive style, higher versus lower levels of trait impulsivity and time misperception (overestimation of time), will be associated with a greater likelihood of suicidal ideation.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred undergraduate students (72% female) at a large, ethnically diverse, suburban university participated in the study for course credit. Participant age ranged from 18 to 51 years ($M=21.32$, $SD=4.68$). Inclusion criteria included fluency in spoken and written English, participant consent, and status as an undergraduate student. Racial composition of the sample was 59% Caucasian, 24% Asian, 10% African American, 1% Pacific Islander, and 6% identified as other.

2.2. Materials

Spielberger State Trait Anxiety Inventory (TAI; Spielberger et al. (1983)). The STAI contains 40 items that provide separate measures of state and trait anxiety with 20 questions each. Only the

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