



Experimentally-enhanced perceptions of meaning confer resilience to the interpersonal adversity implicated in suicide risk

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: The interpersonal theory of suicide proposes that perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (PB-TB) are proximal causes of suicidal desire. Here we test whether experimentally induced perceptions of meaningfulness can confer resilience against interpersonal adversity and enhance persistence, the erosion of which is a potential antecedent to suicide risk.

Methods: Undergraduate university students ($N = 93$) were randomly allocated to complete a team task under conditions of high or low task-extrinsic meaning and high or low PB-TB. Participants in the high task-extrinsic meaning condition were given the opportunity to donate to a charity as part of their experimental participation, whereas those in the low task-extrinsic meaning condition were not.

Results: Consistent with the buffering hypothesis that suicide resilience is active only when adversity is heightened, participants in the high task-extrinsic meaning condition who reported higher levels of perceived meaningfulness displayed greater willingness to persist in the face of experimentally-induced high PB and TB compared to those in the low task-extrinsic meaning condition and those in conditions where the interpersonal adversity was not induced (low PB and TB).

Limitations: The meaning induction was effective only in a subset of participants. The dual induction of PB and TB also precludes inferences about their independent causal effects on willingness to persist.

Conclusions: Meaning-making interventions may attenuate the impact of proximal interpersonal antecedents of suicidal desire. Enhancing resilience in this manner can potentially improve the efficacy of prevention efforts beyond the direct amelioration of suicide risk factors.

1. Introduction

The interpersonal theory of suicide (ITS; Joiner, 2005) proposes that a desire for suicide arises when two fundamental human needs are thwarted: the need to contribute and the need to belong. These proximal causal factors manifest as perceptions that one is a burden on others (*perceived burdensomeness*) and that one is lacking meaningful interpersonal connections (*thwarted belongingness*). An individual experiencing heightened levels of these aversive states views suicide as a means of escape from this interpersonal adversity. The notion of suicide as an escape from psychological pain is reflected in several contemporary theories (e.g., Baumeister, 1990; O'Connor, Platt, & Gordon, 2011) and highlights the importance of persistence in adversity. The current study uses an experimental paradigm (Collins, Best, Stritzke, & Page, 2016) to test the role of perceived meaningfulness as a life-sustaining factor that may increase persistence and reduce one's desire to escape in the face of experimentally-induced perceived

burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness.

Perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness are associated with increased risk for suicidal desire in diverse samples including adolescents (Barzilay et al., 2015), young adults (Joiner et al., 2009), psychotherapy outpatients (Van Orden, Lynam, Hollar, & Joiner, 2006), and community cohorts (Christensen, Batterham, Soubelet, & Mackinnon, 2013). Recent experimental evidence also supports the causal effects of these constructs on desire to escape as a potential antecedent to suicide risk and highlights the importance of resilience factors that may protect against suicidality even when interpersonal adversity is heightened (Collins et al., 2016; George, Collins, Cao, Stritzke, & Page, 2017). Factors conferring resilience are posited to exist on a separate dimension to risk and serve to mitigate the impact of risk factors on subsequent suicidality (Cheavens, Cukrowicz, Hansen, & Mitchell, 2016; Johnson, Wood, Gooding, Taylor, & Tarrier, 2011). Identifying modifiable resilience factors may therefore enhance the effectiveness of suicide prevention efforts by providing targets for

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intervention that complement the direct amelioration of suicidal ideation and its interpersonal antecedents (Collins, Stritzke, Page, Brown, & Wyld, 2018).

The perception that life has meaning and is therefore worth sustaining is arguably a key factor underlying persistence in adversity (Park, 2010). Conversely, a thwarting of the pursuit of meaning can lead to apathy, hopelessness, and diminished motivation (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013; Frankl, 1959; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). One pathway to meaningfulness involves possessing goals that transcend self-interest and current circumstances (Reker, 2000). These goals form part of a framework that facilitates understanding how life experiences, including adverse events, are part of a greater scheme (Baumeister et al., 2013; Garland, Farb, Goldin, & Fredrickson, 2015; Reker, 2000). The ability to find meaning in negative life experiences is acknowledged to be a powerful coping mechanism and provides a foundation for resilience in the face of obstacles and stressors (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). A strong meaning framework may therefore provide a buffer against the negative effects of interpersonal adversity on suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Heisel & Flett, 2004; Kleiman & Beaver, 2013).

In a study of older adults, meaning in life mediated the relationship between high levels of perceived burdensomeness and the prospective prediction of suicidal ideation, suggesting that perceptions of burdensomeness may contribute to suicidality by reducing perceptions of meaning (Van Orden, Bamonti, King, & Duberstein, 2012). Similarly, the presence of meaning in life mediated the relationship between perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation over an eight-week period (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013). Moreover, presence of meaning at baseline predicted reduced risk for suicidality at follow-up beyond other resilience factors such as gratitude and social support. Thus, interventions targeting an increase in perceptions of meaning may enhance resilience to proximal interpersonal antecedents of suicidal desire.

One way to safely test the value of meaning-making interventions that may increase resilience to the interpersonal adversity thought to causally underlie suicidal desire is to enhance perceptions of meaningfulness experimentally, and to examine the effect on persistence during conditions of experimentally-induced perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. That is, rather than testing hypotheses that directly involve suicidal thoughts and behaviors, the aim is to manipulate within a controlled environment risk and resilience variables that are relevant to suicide and test their effects on a conceptually and theoretically relevant analogue outcome. Specifically, the ability to persist rather than escape from situations of interpersonal adversity is arguably a key determinant of vulnerability or resilience to the interpersonal factors thought to underlie suicidal desire. Indeed, evidence suggests that the thwarting of fundamental human needs for competence and relatedness has a detrimental impact on goal-directed motivation to persist (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and can lead to self-defeating behaviors, including suicide (Tucker & Wingate, 2014; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002; Van Orden et al., 2010). A decline in willingness to persist in the face of experimentally-heightened perceptions of burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness mirrors similar processes as those thought to causally drive the desire to escape such interpersonal adversity via suicide (Joiner, 2005).

In the current study we use the Interpersonal Persistence Task (Collins et al., 2016) to examine the influence of perceived meaningfulness on the desire to escape from interpersonal adversity. We manipulate perceptions of meaningfulness by asking participants to select a charitable cause to donate to a small amount of money provided by the experimenter as part of their participation. The aim of this donation is to provide participants with a “silver lining” that may enhance their ability to find meaning even when their experience of the task may be negative (Taylor, 1989). Altruistic behaviors such as charitableness are important sources of meaning across the lifespan by increasing one's sense that life has purpose and value (Baumeister et al., 2013; Hill et al.,

2013; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Moreover, altruism is associated with greater resilience, persistence, and adaptation in the face of stress (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Southwick, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2005). Thus, linking participation in the experiment to a charitable donation may infuse the task with a sense of meaning that protects against deficits in persistence caused by elevated perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness.

The aim was to test whether increasing perceptions of meaningfulness would buffer desire to escape under conditions of heightened perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (high PB-TB). It was hypothesized that participants in a condition given the opportunity to donate to a charitable cause (high task-extrinsic meaning) would be protected against deficits in persistence compared to participants in a condition not given an opportunity to donate (low task-extrinsic meaning). Given perceptions of meaning are, by definition, personal in nature (Frankl, 1959), participants receiving the task-extrinsic meaning induction would be expected to vary in the extent to which they derive meaning from the charitable donation and the influence this has on their perceptions of meaning during the task. Thus, we expected the buffering effects of the meaning manipulation to vary as a function of *perceived* meaningfulness during the team task, such that only participants in the high task-extrinsic meaning condition who also rated their level of perceived meaningfulness as high would report lower desire to drop out of the task and escape the interpersonal adversity. In contrast, in the low task-extrinsic condition, perceived meaningfulness ratings would be unrelated to task persistence. As the buffering hypothesis proposes that resilience is relevant only when adversity is heightened (Johnson et al., 2011), we expected there to be no relationship between perceived meaningfulness and desire to quit in either high or low task-extrinsic meaning conditions when perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness were not induced (low PB-TB). Finally, because negative affect can reduce persistence at goal-directed activities (Hills, Hill, Mamone, & Dickerson, 2001), we also accounted for the influence of general psychological distress on the desire to escape.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Power analyses for mixed-design analyses of variance (ANOVA) comprising one within subjects factor with six levels (time points) and two between subjects factors (two conditions each with two levels) and for moderated regression analyses with eight predictors (including the interaction term) were conducted using G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). For the ANOVA, based on a power of 0.80, an alpha level of .05, and a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$), an estimated sample size of 76 was required to reliably detect significant main and interaction effects. Similarly, for the moderated regression with a power of 0.80, an alpha level of .05, and a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), the required sample size to reliably detect a significant interaction effect split across low and high PB-TB conditions was estimated at 43. Therefore, the current sample provided sufficient statistical power for both sets of analyses.

Ninety-three undergraduate students ($M_{age} = 19.45$ years, $SD = 5.47$, 66 females) were recruited based on scores on a screening questionnaire assessing attitudes and behaviors towards charitable causes (Webb, Green, & Brashear, 2000). Those scoring in the upper 40% of the distribution, indicating a positive view of charitable causes and that helping others was important to them, were invited. Rather than using a median split, we limited selection to those participants clearly in the top half of the distribution (i.e., top 40%) in order to maximize the likelihood that they would be susceptible to a meaning-making induction based on the opportunity to donate to a charitable organization. To personalise the available charity options, participants had to have endorsed at least one of six charity organisations on the screening measure, which were the same six options available during

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