Personality and Individual Differences 50 (2011) 84–89

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Post-traumatic distress and the presence of post-traumatic growth and meaning in life: Experiential avoidance as a moderator

Todd B. Kashdan *, Jennifer Q. Kane

George Mason University, Jelena Kecmanovic, Argosy University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 March 2010
Received in revised form 26 August 2010
Accepted 27 August 2010
Available online 25 September 2010

Keywords:
Trauma
Anxiety
Purpose in life
Experiential avoidance

ABSTRACT

Existing models of trauma suggest that for recovery to occur, trauma related cues and emotions require awareness and openness while survivors continue committing action toward valued life aims (other than regulating emotions). Based on this theoretical framework, an unwillingness to be in contact with distressing thoughts and feelings (experiential avoidance) might operate together with post-traumatic distress to predict when people find benefits and meaning in the aftermath of trauma. We hypothesized that people reporting post-traumatic distress and less reliance on experiential avoidance would report greater post-traumatic growth and meaning in life compared with other trauma survivors. We administered questionnaires to 176 college students reporting at least one traumatic event. Results supported these moderation models. This is the fourth study (with different samples, measures, and methodologies) to provide evidence that a combination of excessive anxiety and a heavy reliance on experiential avoidance leads to attenuated well-being. We discuss the implications for understanding heterogeneous trauma reactions.

1. Introduction

Based on epidemiological data, approximately 61% of men and 51% of women in the United States report at least one traumatic event during their lives (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). The lifetime occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) ranges between 6% and 9% (Kessler et al., 2005). Thus, the majority of trauma survivors do not develop PTSD; in fact, a majority report finding personal growth in the aftermath of traumatic exposure (Sears, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We sought to explore symptom profiles that offer insight into when trauma has an impact on meaning-making and personal growth.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) used the term post-traumatic growth to refer to the experience of positive adjustment resulting from how a person responds and rebuilds following a life altering event. The common manifestations of reported post-traumatic growth include a greater appreciation of life and refined sense of priorities; strengthening of significant, close relationships; recognition and elaboration of personal strengths; recognition of new possibilities or a sense of purpose for one's life; and spiritual development. By definition, recognized or actual personal growth is initiated by the same set of events and cognitive processing that increase the risk of distress and functional impairment (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998).

Theory and research suggests that the experience and exploration of negative aspects of a trauma are often necessary for the reconstruction of disrupted meaning systems (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). We explored the conditions that facilitate helpful and unhelpful responses to trauma related distress.

Findings are mixed on whether reports of distress after adversity are relevant to recovery and well-being. Several researchers found that people with greater post-traumatic distress report greater post-traumatic growth (Aldwin, Levenson, & Spiro, 1994; Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001), others found an inverse relation between post-traumatic distress and growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), still others found no relation (Cordova, Cunningham, & Carlson, 2001; Widows, Jacobsen, Booth-Jones, & Fields, 2005). Mixed findings suggest that the relation between post-traumatic distress and outcomes such as growth and meaning in life may be more nuanced than previously believed.

1.1. Potential moderating role of experiential avoidance

Post-trauma processing theories suggest that recovery from trauma requires people to process the trauma-related information until it can be integrated into a coherent model of the self (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Attempts to integrate the trauma often require some variant of exposure to aversive thoughts, emotions, and images related to the trauma (Batten, Orsillo, & Walser, 2005). When such

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, MS 3F5, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States. Tel.: +1 703 993 9486; fax: +1 703 993 1359.
E-mail address: tkashdan@gmu.edu (T.B. Kashdan).

0191-8869/$ - see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.paid.2010.08.028

processing occurs, it is often associated with benefit finding following trauma (Park et al., 1996).

The basic assumption of these theories is that to successfully process traumatic events, one must be willing to be in contact with private events such as emotions, memories, images, and bodily sensations that often elicit painful reactions. Fusion with the literal content of unwanted thoughts and feelings (e.g., self-doubt, panic symptoms), and spending an inordinate amount of time avoiding these thoughts and feelings hinders the ability to pursue long-term values and goals (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). According to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) theorists (Hayes et al., 2006), individuals need to be flexible in how behavioral action is dependent on private thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Experiential avoidance is the overarching ACT term for a lack of psychological flexibility (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Avoiding exposure to feared thoughts, feelings, and sensations interferes with potential disconfirming evidence of danger in the environment (Barlow, 2000) and reduces sensitivity to natural, healthy reinforcement contingencies in the environment such that individuals are unable to exploit opportunities for generating positive experiences and meaning (Hayes et al., 2006).

Experiential avoidance can be differentiated from the highly studied construct of avoidance coping in the stress literature. Avoidance coping is an umbrella term that reflects how people manage stressful life events. In an avoidance coping framework (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), diverting attention away from a stressor is designed to reduce arousal associated with stressors or build personal abilities to handle stressors. In this framework, cognitive appraisals precede avoidance coping. Initially, individuals create primary appraisals of the personal threat in the environment including the potential to compromise well-being. Subsequently, individuals create secondary appraisals concerning what can be done to prevent or handle harm. Perceptions about available personal resources and the controllability of an event determine whether a person resorts to avoidance coping. Depending on the particular theory or measure, avoidance coping entails a broad array of strategies including seeking out other people as a social diversion, engaging in another task as a distraction, denial, repression, and suppression.

Experiential avoidance extends this coping literature in several ways. First, the literature on avoidance coping has been focused on external stressors; experiential avoidance also includes the unwillingness to experience particular thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations–with regular attempts to alter their form or frequency (Hayes et al., 1996). Much of the pain that individuals cope with is a result of internally generated experiences that are often viewed as literal representations of reality instead of products of the human brain. Within ACT, clients are taught skills for how to defuse from internal experiences along with skills to undermine avoidance and build approach processes (Hayes et al., 2006). Second, experiential avoidance reflects the inability to commit action toward valued life aims due to an unwillingness to experience particular private events. That is, experiential avoidance is contextualized. Avoidance outside the context of the pursuit of goals aligned with valued life aims is less of a concern with an ACT perspective. This is because any self-regulatory strategy, avoidance or approach related, can be healthy or unhealthy depending on the demands of a situation (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Third, avoidance coping has been narrowly focused on the down regulation of negative experiences following external stressors. Experiential avoidance is a broader construct that addresses how individuals respond to unwanted internal events of negative, neutral, or positive valence. Individuals often want to down-regulate negative internal events but there are situations when people seek to avoid positive experiences (e.g., positive feedback from others heightens expectations for the next interaction).

Experiential avoidance can also be differentiated from the avoidance symptoms of PTSD. The emotional numbing and avoidance symptoms of PTSD are "best characterized as a deficit in emotional processing arising from episodes of hyperemotionality brought on by exposure to trauma cues" (Litz, Orsillo, Kaloupek, & Weathers, 2000, p. 26). Experiential avoidance, in contrast, reflects the repetition of unworkable patterns of behavior that prevent people from acting in ways that are congruent with their central values. A trauma survivor can avoid experiences that have nothing to do with ongoing emotional episodes or their trauma history. For instance, people can avoid the generation or expression of positive emotions out of concern of losing control. Experiential avoidance can be viewed as a broader construct than emotional numbing and avoidance symptoms.

Individuals with PTSD vary in their reliance on experiential avoidance. Research has shown that experiential avoidance in trauma survivors contributes to the maintenance of PTSD (Marx & Sloan, 2005) and lack of reactivity to rewarding environmental stimuli (Litz et al., 2000; Orsillo, Batten, Plumb, Luterek, & Roessner, 2004). Organizing one's life around attempts to regulate unwanted emotions can limit personal growth opportunities and diminish well-being. When asked what they think about, plan for, and try to accomplish in their daily lives, combat veterans with PTSD endorsed more idiographic strivings related to controlling and avoiding emotions (Kashdan, Breen, & Julian, 2010). Importantly, regulatory efforts failed to translate into discernible benefits such as joy or meaning in life. Conversely, veterans without PTSD were more likely to endorse strivings unrelated to avoidance or regulating emotions, and subsequently experienced greater psychological benefits from their striving effort and progress. The inefficient allocation of finite time and energy to suppress traumatic material, conceal emotions, avoid events that might elicit unwanted feelings, and regulate responses to trauma cues have a compound effect on attempts to be mindfully present, extract pleasure and meaning from events, or realize one's strengths (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Hayes et al., 2006). These findings shed light on how actions made with the intention to protect the self by avoiding unpleasant thoughts and feelings interfere with positive outcomes such as the detection of meaning in life and personal growth.

For an individual to acquire positive outcomes from a traumatic event, direct confrontation with sources of distress is required (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Existing theories suggest a sequential model with post-trauma distress and experiential avoidance as precursors to possible growth and meaning in life. When trauma survivors are distressed, we hypothesized that psychological flexibility (i.e., less reliance on experiential avoidance) would be associated with greater reports of post-traumatic growth and meaning in life. In contrast, we hypothesized that the combination of excessive emotional distress and experiential avoidance would be linked to compromised well-being. This moderation model has been supported in three prior studies (Kashdan & Breen, 2008; Kashdan, Morina, & Priebe, 2008; Kashdan & Steger, 2006)–showing that when an individual is willing to be in contact with and openly express their emotions, anxiety fails to impede their positive emotions and events in daily life. Of the studies exploring this model, only one used a sample of trauma survivors (Kashdan et al., 2008). The current study is the first to explore post-traumatic growth and meaning in life as outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 176 college students (136 women, 40 men) with an average age of 21.52 (*SD* = 7.19) from a mid-Atlantic