

Negative Urgency and Lack of Perseverance: Identification of Differential Pathways of Onset and Maintenance Risk in the Longitudinal Prediction of Nonsuicidal Self-Injury

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Many researchers have identified impulsivity-related personality traits as correlates of and risk factors for nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI). Using a longitudinal design, we tested the hypothesis that one such trait, negative urgency (the tendency to act rashly when distressed), predicts the onset of NSSI during the first year of college and a different trait, lack of perseverance (the disposition to fail to maintain focus on tasks that are difficult or boring), predicts the maintenance of NSSI during the first year of college. In a sample of $n = 1,158$ college women (mean age = 18.04, 95% of participants were 18 at Time 1), we found support for these hypotheses. Negative urgency, measured prior to college entry, predicted the onset of NSSI behavior across the first year of college (odds ratio = 1.58). Lack of perseverance predicted the maintenance of NSSI status across the first year of college, controlling for prior NSSI behavior (odds ratio = 1.73). These findings indicate that different impulsivity-related personality traits may play different roles in the risk process for NSSI.

Keywords: NSSI; longitudinal; negative urgency; lack of perseverance

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NONSUICIDAL SELF-INJURY (NSSI) REFERS TO THE DIRECT, deliberate destruction of bodily tissue without any suicidal intent ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). NSSI is differentiated from other harmful behaviors that are indirect (e.g., smoking, the intentions of which are not to cause harm) and from behaviors for which there is an intent to die or an ambivalence about the potential consequence of dying ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#); [Nock, 2010](#)). Proposed diagnostic criteria for NSSI (the disorder is currently listed in Section 3 of the DSM-5 as a condition that requires further research) identify precipitants such as (a) negative affect, (b) the urge to act, and (c) the expectation that engaging in NSSI will relieve a negative feeling ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)).

NSSI is often considered a rash or impulsive act, so personality dispositions towards impulsive behavior may well be relevant for understanding risk for engagement in NSSI behavior. Although impulsivity has been identified as an important correlate of NSSI, this relationship is not always observed. It is perhaps the case that these mixed results are due to the use of multiple different constructs under the common label of impulsivity ([Claes & Muehlenkamp, 2014](#); [Glenn & Klonsky, 2010](#)). One useful model of the personality underpinnings of impulsive behavior was developed by [Whiteside and Lynam \(2001\)](#) and added to by [Cyders and Smith \(2007\)](#). They identified five personality traits that can lead to impulsive action: (a) negative urgency: the tendency

to act rashly when distressed; (b) positive urgency: the tendency to act rashly when in an unusually positive mood; (c) lack of planning: the tendency to act without forethought; (d) lack of perseverance: the tendency to quit when a task becomes difficult or boring; and (e) sensation-seeking: the need to seek out novel, thrilling, risky stimulation.

We propose a model for trait prediction of NSSI behavior that draws a distinction between risk for onset of NSSI and risk for maintenance of NSSI: we believe that different impulsivity-related traits contribute to onset and maintenance. Concerning onset, initial engagement in NSSI may well involve a rash, impulsive act for the purpose of achieving negative reinforcement. It does appear that NSSI can operate as a negatively reinforced coping or emotion-regulation strategy that temporarily relieves or helps avoid unwanted emotional arousal or feelings of guilt, sadness, or distress (Chapman, Gratz & Brown, 2006; Favazza, 1998; Gordon et al., 2010; Klonsky, 2007; Nock & Prinstein, 2004, 2005). Among the impulsivity-related traits described above, negative urgency is thought to operate via negative reinforcement (Cyders & Smith, 2008). A number of longitudinal studies have produced findings consistent with a negative reinforcement mechanism for negative urgency in the prediction of numerous impulsive behaviors, such as smoking, problem drinking, and binge eating (Anestis, Selby, & Joiner, 2007; Doran et al., 2013; Fischer, Peterson, & McCarthy, 2013; Guller, Zapolski, & Smith, in press; Pearson, Combs, Zapolski, & Smith, 2012; Settles, Cyders, & Smith, 2010). Importantly, many of these studies document prediction of onset of these behaviors by prior levels of negative urgency (Guller et al., in press; Pearson et al., 2012; Pearson, Zapolski, & Smith, 2014). Thus, we propose that negative urgency, a characteristic of individuals associated with impulsive acts to achieve negative reinforcement, predicts the onset of NSSI.

However, once NSSI behavior is being engaged in regularly, other traits may play an important role in its maintenance. Individuals who engage in NSSI often attempt to reduce or stop the behavior: Smith, Steele, Weitzman, Trueba, and Meure (2014) recently found that up to 80% of recent self-injurers report a desire to stop engaging in NSSI. However, stopping this behavior requires one to persevere through upsetting emotions and high levels of negative affect, which are thought to increase the urge to engage in the behavior (Bresin, Carter, & Gordon, 2013). A lack of an ability to maintain focus on the goal of stopping the behavior—that is, weak ability to persevere in pursuing that goal—may increase the likelihood of maintaining the

behavior. We thus hypothesize that lack of perseverance is a primary trait predictor of maintenance of NSSI.

Existing personality studies have generally not distinguished between onset and maintenance of NSSI and so do not speak directly to our hypotheses. However, because of the importance of negative affect in NSSI behavior (Armey, Crowther, & Miller, 2011), the well-supported model that negative urgency involves rash acts to achieve negative reinforcement (Cyders & Smith, 2008), the established theoretical and empirical link between NSSI and the trait of negative urgency (Glenn & Klonsky, 2011; Klonsky, 2007; Selby, Anestis, & Joiner, 2008), and the transdiagnostic evidence that negative urgency predicts the onset of impulsive behaviors (e.g., Guller et al., in press), there is reason to hypothesize that negative urgency plays a role in NSSI onset. In addition, as we describe below, there is some evidence consistent with the role of lack of perseverance in maintenance of the behavior.

CROSS-SECTIONAL PREDICTION

In a number of cross-sectional studies, negative urgency has been shown to relate to NSSI. Glenn and Klonsky (2010) found that individuals who engaged in NSSI were best distinguished from individuals who did not engage in NSSI by trait levels of negative urgency. Negative urgency was one impulsivity-related predictor of NSSI among individuals seeking treatment for substance abuse (Lynam, Miller, Miller, Bernalova, & Lejuez, 2011), and the trait concurrently predicted self-injuring frequency, variety of NSSI methods, and number of years self-injuring in college students. In addition, negative urgency was the only impulsivity-related trait that was a common risk factor associated with increased NSSI, alcohol use, and problematic eating, which are all behaviors typically associated with negative reinforcement (Dir, Karyadi, & Cyders, 2013).

While negative urgency has emerged as a correlate in several studies, other impulsivity-related traits have emerged less consistently. Lack of planning, lack of perseverance, sensation-seeking, and positive urgency correlated with NSSI in some studies but not others, and some studies have found no relationships between any of the traits and NSSI (Claes & Muehlenkamp, 2014; Lynam et al., 2011; Taylor, Peterson & Fischer, 2012). However, consistent with our proposed model, Glenn and Klonsky (2010) found that lack of perseverance significantly differentiated between current self-injurers and past self-injurers.

LONGITUDINAL PREDICTION

The prospective prediction of NSSI behaviors from trait-based predictors is less often studied and less

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