Suicide Attempters Show a Maladaptive Response to Criticism

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Introduction

- Self-criticism is a risk factor for suicide and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). People who deliberately harm themselves are more self-critical than people who engage in indirect forms of self-injury (e.g., substance abuse), and self-punishment is often reported as a motive for engaging in NSSI.

- High levels of self-criticism (or internal criticism) predict how long people will endure a physically painful stimulus. Here, we examine whether external criticism facilitates passive self-punishment among individuals with a history of self-harm.

Method

- Iowa Gambling Task (IGT). 66 participants (30 controls, 25 NSSI, and 11 suicide attempters) were instructed to maximize virtual profit over 100 trials by selecting from four decks of cards offering different monetary rewards and punishments. Two decks offered infrequent, large punishments. Two other decks yielded more frequent, smaller punishments. The dependent variable of interest was the number of choices from decks containing infrequent punishment minus the number of selections from decks containing frequent punishment. Higher scores indicate punishment avoidance.

- Criticism challenge. During the IGT, participants heard critical comments presented four times at regular intervals. Participants were instructed to imagine these comments being presented four times at regular intervals.

- Music Task. Following the IGT, participants listened to Prokofiev’s “Russia Under the Mongolian Yoke” played at half-speed, a widely used negative mood induction, for as long as they wished. Longer listening times indicated higher tolerance of the unpleasant stimulus.

Results

- Criticism is associated with a passive tolerance of aversive circumstances in people with a history of suicide attempts.
  - When confronted with criticism, suicide attempters failed to avoid IGT decks that resulted in frequent monetary punishment, whereas both healthy controls and non-suicidal self-injuries showed a strong preference for decks associated with infrequent punishment.
  - Participants with a history of suicide attempts subsequently listened to unpleasant music for longer than those without such a history.
  - Failure to avoid punishment on the IGT was correlated with how long people tolerated the unpleasant music.

Summary/Discussion

- In vulnerable individuals, criticism may increase exposure to other experiences that reinforce a negative self-concept (e.g., “bad things always happen to me”). Chronic exposure to situations that involve pain, distress, or punishment may lead to feelings of despondency, hopelessness, and pessimism, thereby elevating risk for suicide attempts.

References