

Open Your Class With This Tomorrow

The Man Who Couldn't Stop: OCD and the True Story of a Life Lost in Thought

Do not think of a white bear! The more you attempt to do this, the more it gets caught in your mind. Dr. Daniel Wegner of the Mental Control Lab at Harvard University has proven this true. It can be hard to get rid of unwanted thoughts.

Suppressing the White Bear Experiment (Adapted from the Wegner Experiment (1987))

Directions:

Procedure

1. Split the class into 2 groups: Group A and Group B.
2. Group A Directions:
 - a. Break into partners. One will start as the experimenter and the other will be the participant.
 - b. Part A-1: Have the participant share what they are thinking about (stream of consciousness) for five minutes while not trying to think of a white bear. If a white bear comes to mind, they should tap their pencil on the desk.
 - c. The experimenter will track the pencil taps during that time frame.
 - d. Part A-2: Have the participant complete the same exercise, but purposefully think of a white bear. If a white bear comes to mind, they should tap their pencil on the desk.
 - e. The experimenter will track the pencil taps during that time frame.
 - f. If time permits switch roles and repeat the process.
3. Group B Directions:
 - a. Break into partners. One will start as the experimenter and the other will be the participant.
 - b. Part B-1: Have the participant share what they are thinking about (stream of consciousness) for five minutes while thinking of a white bear. When the white bear comes to mind, they should tap a pencil on the desk.
 - c. The experimenter will track the pencil taps during that time frame.
 - d. Part B-2: Have the participant complete the same exercise, but try not to think of a white bear. If a white bear comes to mind, they should tap their pencil on the desk.
 - e. The experimenter will track the pencil taps during that time frame.
 - f. If time permits switch roles and repeat the process.

Results

- Compare results from Group A to Group B for the 2 different conditions (Part 1 and Part 2). Which condition had the most pencil taps? (A-1, A-2, B-1, B-2)
- The original research looked at Group A. In Part A-1, on average participants thought of a white bear more than once per minute despite being told to not think of a white bear. In Part A-2, participants thought of a white bear even more because suppressing the thought for the first time caused it to “rebound” more in their mind later. Repeated many times, it became hard to suppress unwanted thoughts. Trying to suppress the thought leads to increase in thoughts later on,

after someone has stopped attempting to suppress them. This is called the rebound effect.

Discussion

- What type of strategies might help someone suppress thoughts?
 - Possible suggestions include: focus on a distractor, postpone the thought, multitask, exposure to the thought in a controlled and systematic way, meditation and mindfulness.
- Identify the independent and dependent variable.
- Identify the control and experimental group.
- Was random assignment used?
- Create a graph of your results.

References

Winerman, L. (2011). Suppressing the 'white bears.' *Monitor on Psychology*, 42(9), 44.

Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/10/unwanted-thoughts.aspx>