

Re-Living stressful events may be painful but also therapeutic, according to UCSD-Led study

March 26, 1998

HOLD FOR RELEASE: March 26, 1998

Media Contact: Warren R. Froelich, (619) 534-8564, wfroelic@ucsd.edu

RE-LIVING STRESSFUL EVENTS MAY BE PAINFUL, BUT ALSO THERAPEUTIC, ACCORDING TO UCSD-LED STUDY

NEW ORLEANS, LA--Re-living in your mind a brief, though stressful event-- like being cut off on the freeway or insulted by a stranger not only is unpleasant, it can result in a temporary increase in your blood pressure, even days after the original experience.

In the long run, however, such vivid recollections may prove beneficial for your mind and body, according to new studies led by psychologists at the University of California, San Diego.

"It's a simple therapeutic notion bringing up troublesome events and thinking about them will be painful, and you'll have blood pressure responses," said Nicholas Christenfeld, associate professor of psychology at UCSD.

"But having worked it through may make the experience less painful the next time."

The studies, presented today at the annual meeting of the Society of Behavioral Medicine, not only support the notion that a popular form of therapy the replay a painful experience in your mind in a relaxing setting actually works. They also suggest that lingering unpleasant thoughts could be damaging to your health.

"Thinking angry thoughts isn't necessarily bad," said Christenfeld, "but thinking angry thoughts that result in a physiological response may be bad for your heart."

Also participating in the studies were Laura M. Glynn, UCSD psychology graduate student; Ebbe B. Ebbeson, UCSD professor of psychology; and William Gerin, an associate professor with the Cornell University Medical Center.

In one set of studies described by the researchers, twenty subjects were asked to perform arithmetic exercises in their minds. While doing the mental arithmetic, the subjects were continually prodded to work faster and faster. Each subject's heart rate and blood pressure were continually monitored during the session.

"The subjects came away with the feeling that the experimenter was cold and really obnoxious," said Christenfeld.

The activity provoked an almost immediate elevation of blood pressure in the subjects, an average systolic increase of 27 mm of mercury. (If resting systolic blood pressure was initially 110, it rose to 137 during the exercise.)

Subsequently, the subjects were asked to vividly recall details of the experience at one of two different time intervals. Ten of the subjects were asked to perform the so-called "rumination" task just 20 minutes later, another ten were asked to perform the task a week later.

The results showed a clear link between ruminating about the aggravating experience and an increase in blood pressure. For both time intervals, systolic blood pressure rose about 12-15 mm of mercury, roughly half the increase provoked by the original experience.

"So it doesn't matter how long it's been," said Christenfeld. "When you're asked to come back and think about it, you still have a big response."

As a follow-up to this study, the 10 subjects who were asked to recreate their experiences 20 minutes later were asked to return to the lab the following week. Again, they were asked to relive the harassing event.

This time, however, nobody in the group experienced a significant increase in blood pressure.

"In other words, we had two groups of people coming back after one week," said Christenfeld. "One group had already gone through rumination, and they showed no increase in blood pressure. The other group, without having gone through the rumination, showed a big response."

The results suggest that by forcing yourself to think about a negative experience, you can alter its impact from something highly charged and emotional to something more abstract and less distressing.

"You can imagine the first time you think about having been cut off on the freeway that morning, you get worked up," said Christenfeld. "But the second time you think about it, it's becoming more abstract. It's now cold rumination."

"This is all very preliminary," he added. "But what we think we're seeing is that the 'count to 10 rule of anger,' may not work because in a week, you can still get worked up."

"But if you think about it for a little while, you can drain the heat out of it."

Of course, Christenfeld suggests, there's an alternative. You can just forget about the troubling experience, perhaps by keeping yourself so busy you won't remember it. Indeed, prior studies indicate that bad experiences can be pushed aside in the mind through the pursuit of distracting tasks.

"That's a real debate in therapy," he said. "Some people say, at some point, you're going to think about the negative experience, so you might as well do it sooner in a cozy environment. Here, you work through your problems, but you spend a lot of time in misery."

"Other people will advise you to try to never think about it, to distract yourself from the pain. But you'd better be really confident that you will not think about the problem again."

(March 26, 1998)