

Daydreaming About Death

Violent Daydreaming as a Form of Emotion Dysregulation in Suicidality

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Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that suicidal individuals may daydream about suicide as a method of mood regulation (including increasing positive affect). These daydreams may center on future suicidal plans, previous suicide attempts, or on the ways that others will react to their death. Yet, even though violent daydreams may increase positive affect in the short term, in the long run they may actually increase both suicidality and the ability to engage in suicidal behavior. In this study, a sample of 83 college students was given the Beck Depression Inventory, Anger Rumination Scale, and the Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation. The authors hypothesized that a two-way interaction would exist between high levels of depression and high levels of violent daydreaming to predict increased levels of suicidality. Using linear regression, the results of this study supported the hypothesis. The clinical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: *daydreaming; fantasizing; suicide; emotion dysregulation; revenge*

Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that severely suicidal individuals may experience intense, vivid, and prolonged ideation about their death by suicide. Suicidal individuals often report experiencing a sort of “daydreaming” or fantasizing in which they can see their death by suicide very clearly in their imagination—as if they are watching a clear and vivid video of their own death by suicide. For example, Shneidman (1996, p. 75) reports the case of a woman, “Beatrice,” who constantly engaged in daydreaming about her death. “Every night, before fading off to sleep, I imagined committing suicide,” she explained. “I became obsessed with death. I rehearsed my own funeral over and over, adding careful details each time.” Another example of suicidal daydreaming comes from a vignette

from Rudd, Joiner, and Rajab (2001, p. 175) about a man who had recently purchased a gun in contemplation of his own death by suicide. In an entry in his journal following the purchase of the gun he writes, "I fired my gun today; five rounds. It's really loud. I've been seeing myself do it now, thinking about it, dreaming about it [suicide]." This man died by suicide days later.

Imagining one's death by suicide is a frightening prospect to most non-suicidal individuals. Yet, many severely suicidal individuals appear to have a romantic attachment to death; engaging in vivid daydreams about the method and aftereffects of death by suicide even seems to be a pleasant activity to them. This daydreaming may actually be a form of emotion dysregulation in suicidal individuals, one that would appear, perhaps paradoxically, to increase positive affect yet may increase later risk for serious suicidal behavior.

The act of suicide may represent an escape from suffering and pain (Baumeister, 1990), and when thinking about the release that death would provide, suicidal individuals may experience positive affect similar to the way that a nonsuicidal individual may daydream about future life events that look forward to such as a vacation or other pleasurable event. In fact, Linehan (1993) has proposed that suicidal behavior is a result of emotion dysregulation. Individuals who are suicidal may experience such strong negative emotions about their lives that engaging in fantasies about violent acts such as suicide may serve as a means of increasing positive affect. In this sense, daydreaming about death would be a form of emotion dysregulation, because engaging in this emotion regulation strategy may increase positive affect, yet it would do so in a maladaptive and pernicious way. A similar maladaptive emotion regulation phenomenon is non-suicidal self-injury; recent studies suggest that some individuals purposefully inflict physical pain on themselves as a temporarily effective, yet destructive, way to avoid experiencing negative affective states and increase positive emotions such as relief (Brown, Comtois, & Linehan, 2002; Chapman, Gratz, & Brown, 2006; Klonsky, *in press*; Nock & Prinstein, 2004).

Although viewing violent daydreaming as a form of emotion dysregulation may explain why suicidal individuals daydream about death by suicide, it is also possible that violent daydreams themselves serve as actual suicidal phenomena per se that increase future suicidality and the ability to engage in suicidal behavior. Joiner (2005) has proposed that in order to engage in severe suicidal behavior, suicidal individuals must habituate to the fear of pain and injury through pain-inducing and violent life experiences. These experiences can range from such things as contact sports where

injury is common to actual suicide attempts. Joiner also suggests that mental practice may facilitate suicide completion by contributing to the process of habituating to the painful and provocative aspects of death by suicide. That is, vivid and long-lasting preoccupation regarding one's suicide may represent a form of mental practice for suicide. This may be especially true if the fantasies of the suicidal individual are violent and graphic. Motto and Bostrom (1990) provide indirect empirical evidence that mental practice plays an important role in death by suicide. They found that in more than 3,000 patients at risk for suicide, of which 38 later died by suicide, one of the most important factors that predicted death by suicide was "contemplation of hanging or jumping." Further evidence for the role of mental preparation for a suicide attempt can be seen in individuals who abort suicide attempts. M. E. Barber, Marzuk, Leon, and Portera (1998) define aborted suicide attempts as events in which an individual is one step away from attempting suicide but does not do so and thus incurs no physical injury. In a study to investigate the properties of aborted suicide attempts, M. E. Barber and colleagues interviewed 135 psychiatric inpatients, more than half of whom had reported at least one aborted suicide attempt. Among these suicidal individuals, intent-to-die ratings for aborted suicide attempts were similar to intent-to-die ratings for actual suicide attempts. This suggests that aborted attempts possess many of the same mental preparation aspects as those present prior to actual suicide attempts, and this mental preparation may produce habituation and practice effects. Moreover, patients who reported previous aborted attempts were nearly twice as likely to have made an actual suicide attempt, compared to patients with no aborted attempts. Thus, mental rehearsal and daydreaming about death may contribute to the acquired capability to enact lethal self-injury that Joiner (2005) suggests is a required precursor to serious suicidal behavior.

Suicidal individuals may also daydream about previous suicidal experiences, with cognitive sensitization increasing the vividness of their violent daydreams. Cognitive sensitization occurs when an individual undergoes a provocative experience, and subsequently, images and thoughts about that experience become more accessible and easily triggered. Thus, as suicidal experience accumulates, suicide-related cognitions may become more accessible and active (Beck, 1996), including memories of past suicidal experiences. The more accessible and active suicidal thoughts and daydreams become, the more easily they are triggered (e.g., even in the absence of negative events) and the more severe are the subsequent suicidal episodes. In fact, studies have documented that as episodes of suicidality

increase, their relation to external triggers decreases and their severity increases (Joiner & Rudd, 2000; Joiner, Rudd, Rouleau, & Wagner, 2000). This indicates that as suicidality increases, so may the frequency and duration of violent daydreaming.

In addition to daydreaming about a past or future suicidal act, another aspect of suicidal daydreaming may consist of thinking about the aftermath of the act. Individuals may daydream about how other people will react to their death by suicide or how it will make others feel. For example, suicidal individuals may imagine how people they feel have hurt them deeply will react to their suicide, imagining those people bursting into tears and saying that they wish they had treated the suicidal individual better. In fact, expressing desires to seek revenge is considered an important warning sign for suicide (Rudd et al., 2006). Suicidal individuals may also imagine other events following their death, such as “Beatrice” imagining the details of her funeral.

The following study was conducted in order to examine to the effect that the tendency to engage in violent fantasies has on suicidality, especially in the context of depressive symptomatology. Although violent daydreaming may increase suicidality due to increases in the acquired capability to enact lethal self-injury, it is less likely do so unless an individual is feeling depressed—which would provide a reason to daydream about escaping pain and suffering. Thus, it was hypothesized that there would be a two-way interaction between engaging in vivid fantasies of violence and revenge, as measured by the Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the Anger Rumination Scale (ARS; Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001), and increased levels of depression (as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory [BDI]) to predict higher levels of suicidality, as measured by the Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation (BSS). The Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS is a measure of the tendency to think and to daydream about violent actions and revenge in general, and although it does not directly measure the tendency to daydream about suicide specifically, it does provides a measure of the tendency to engage in violent daydreaming, which was predicted to interact with depressive feelings to predict suicidality. The other subscales of the ARS (as well as their interactions with the BDI) were also analyzed in order to demonstrate the specificity of the Thoughts of Revenge subscale on suicidality, showing that the interaction was not due to a general tendency to be angry but rather to the violent daydreaming aspects of the Thoughts of Revenge subscale.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduates enrolled in a general psychology course at a large southeastern university. Each participant received course credit for participation and signed an informed consent form before participating in the experiment. In total, 83 participants (78.4% female) participated in this study. The ethnic composition of the sample was 77.0% White or Caucasian, 10.3% Hispanic or Latino, 8.0% African American, 2.3% Asian American, and 2.4% other. The average age of the participants was 19.2 years old.

Measures

Predictor variables: *ARS* (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001). The ARS measures the tendency to think about anger-provoking situations, to recall anger episodes from the past, and to think about the causes and consequences of anger episodes. The scale consists of 19 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The authors report a 1-month test-retest reliability of .77 and an internal consistency of $\alpha = .93$. The ARS is composed of four subscales: Angry Afterthoughts, Thoughts of Revenge, Angry Memories, and Understanding of Causes.

The Thoughts of Revenge subscale consists of the following items: "I have long living fantasies of revenge after the conflict is over," "When someone makes me angry I can't stop thinking about how to get back at this person," "I have daydreams and fantasies of a violent nature," and "I have difficulties forgiving people who have hurt me." This subscale was chosen as a predictor because of the daydreaming and violent fantasy nature of the items. The Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS has been demonstrated to have a Cronbach's alpha ranging between .72 and .77 (L. Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Sukhodolsky et al, 2001). Cronbach's alpha for the Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS was .76, which suggests adequate internal consistency for this subscale in this sample.

The Angry Afterthoughts subscale pertains to the tendency to ruminate on anger after an anger experience and consists of such items as "Whenever I experience anger, I keep thinking about it for a while," "After an argument is over, I keep fighting with this person in my imagination," and "I re-enact the anger episode in my mind after it has happened." The Angry Memories subscale assesses the tendency to recall memories of previous anger

episodes and consists of such items as “I think about certain events from a long time ago and they still make me angry,” “I keep thinking about events that angered me for a long time,” and “I feel angry about certain things in my life.” The Understanding of Causes subscale pertains to the tendency to try to understand one’s anger experiences and consists of such items as “I analyze events that make me angry,” “I think about the reasons people treat me badly,” and “I have had times when I could not stop being preoccupied with a particular conflict.” Thus, the content of the items composing the items of the Thoughts of Revenge subscale has a distinct “violent” quality that separates this subscale from the others. The daydreaming component is not unique to the Thoughts of Revenge subscale, however, as the Angry Afterthoughts subscale appears to have a similar daydreaming quality to it. For the Angry Afterthoughts subscale, Cronbach’s alpha was .92; for the Angry Memories subscale, it was .89; and for the Understanding of Causes subscale, it was .82.

BDI-II (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). The BDI is a self-report measure that consists of 21 items used to assess depressive symptoms. Participants use a Likert-type scale (0-3) to report the degree to which the different items describe their affective state over the course of the past 2 weeks. The reliability and stability of the BDI have been reviewed extensively (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996).

Dependent variable: BSS (Beck, Steer, & Ranieri, 1988). This is a 21-item self-report measure of suicidal ideation and intent in the past week. Psychometric properties assessed with an outpatient sample suggest good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$). Test-retest data have only been reported for an inpatient sample, and results suggest moderate reliability across a 2-week retest interval ($r = .54$; Beck & Steer, 1993), as would be expected for such a fluid and dynamic phenomenon as suicidality.

Data Analytic Strategy

A linear regression analysis was used to examine the two-way interaction between depression and violent daydreaming. It was predicted that individuals with high scores on the BDI in conjunction with high scores on the Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS would experience higher levels of suicidality than others. Additional regression analyses were used to examine the two-way interactions between the BDI and each of the other ARS subscales (Angry Afterthoughts, Angry Memories, and Understanding of Causes) to predict suicidality in order to compare the interactions between

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations
for Variables Utilized in the Analyses

	BDI	Thoughts of Revenge	Angry Memories	Angry Afterthoughts	Understanding Consequences	BSS	Mean	Standard Deviation
BDI	1.000						7.506	6.821
Thoughts of Revenge	.279*	1.000					6.301	2.617
Angry Memories	.490**	.685**	1.000				9.060	3.670
Angry Afterthoughts	.427**	.730**	.821**	1.000			10.386	4.271
Understanding Causes	.400**	.565**	.766**	.774**	1.000		8.467	3.224
BSS	.208	.409**	.345**	.35**	.207	1.000	3.653	1.589

Note: BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; BSS = Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation.

*Significant at .05 level (2-tailed). **Significant at .01 level (2-tailed).

these other forms of anger rumination and suicidality. None of these additional interactions were hypothesized to significantly predict suicidality.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the predictor and outcome variables can be found in Table 1. The subscales of the ARS demonstrated strong intercorrelations ranging from .57 to .82. Of these subscales, the Thoughts of Revenge subscale had the highest correlation with BSS scores ($r = .41$). The correlation between the BDI, and BSS was somewhat lower than usual ($r = .21$); the means and standard deviations of the BDI and BSS were as expected for a nonclinical sample.

Testing the interaction between BDI and Thoughts of Revenge to predict BSS scores: A linear regression equation was used to examine if the two-way interaction between high scores on the BDI, and high scores on the Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS would predict BSS scores beyond a high score on either predictor variable alone. Step 1: BDI and Thoughts of Revenge were entered into the regression analysis as predictor variables. Step 2: The two-way interaction between the two predictor variables was entered into the regression analysis. Thoughts of Revenge by itself significantly predicted BSS scores ($\beta = .379$, $t = 3.59$, $p < .001$), and the predictor variables alone accounted for approximately 17.8% of the variance. The two-way interaction between BDI and Thoughts of Revenge also significantly predicted BSS scores ($\beta = 1.26$, $t = 3.326$, $p < .001$), and it accounted for an additional 10.1% of the variance. These results are presented in Table 2. Finally, the interaction between the BDI and Thoughts

Table 2
Two-Way Interaction of Depression and Violent
Daydreaming Predicting Suicidality
Correlations

Model	<i>F</i> for Set	<i>R</i> ² for Set	<i>t</i>	Significance	Zero-Order	Part
1 (Constant)	8.650	.178	4.735	.000		
BDI			1.016	.313	.213	.103
Thoughts of Revenge			3.590	.001	.409	.364
2 (Constant)	10.180	.101	5.699	.000		
BDI			-2.805	.006	.213	-.268
Thoughts of Revenge			-.700	.486	.409	-.067
BDI × Thoughts of Revenge			3.326	.001	.410	.318

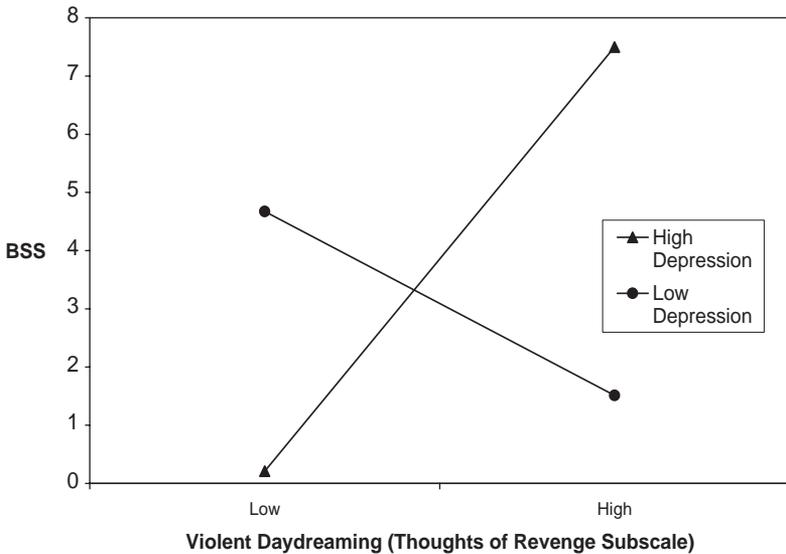
Note: BDI = Beck Depression Inventory. Dependent variable: Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation.

of Revenge subscale was graphed to confirm the form of the interaction. This graph confirmed that high scores on both the BDI and Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS predicted high BSS scores (see Figure 1).

Additional analyses were conducted to test the interactions between the BDI and the other subscales of the ARS (Angry Afterthoughts, Angry Memories, and Understanding of Causes) to predict suicidality in comparison to the two-way interaction between BDI scores and Thoughts of Revenge scores. The regression analyses indicated that all of the additional two-way interactions were nonsignificant. These findings suggest that the effects of the hypothesized two-way interaction are due to the violent daydreaming and revenge aspects of the Thoughts of Revenge scale interacting with depression as opposed to a general tendency to ruminate on angry affect.

Next, all four of the two-way interactions between the ARS subscales and the BDI were simultaneously regressed with the prediction that only the Thoughts of Revenge and BDI interaction would significantly predict suicidality, even when controlling for the other anger rumination interactions. The results of this analysis (see Table 3) confirmed that the Thoughts of Revenge and BDI interaction remained significant ($\beta = 1.449$, $t = 3.716$, $p < .001$) even when controlling for the other ARS subscales and BDI interactions, and it accounted for 11.9% of the variance (on top of the 24.9% of the variance accounted for by the other variables and interactions). It is notable that when these interactions were regressed together, a two-way interaction between the Angry Afterthoughts and BDI gained significance ($\beta = 1.51$, $t = 2.338$, $p < .05$); however, this interaction was not significant

Figure 1
Two-Way Interaction of Depression and Violent Daydreaming Predicting Suicidality



Note: BSS = Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation.

when tested alone. As predicted, then, the only interaction that significantly predicted suicidality scores in all analyses was that between Thoughts of Revenge and BDI.

Discussion

Case studies of suicidal individuals have indicated that many may daydream or fantasize about the methods and aftershocks of their death by suicide. Violent daydreaming may then increase the suicidality of the individual as well as the ability to actually enact lethal self-injury. Using the Thoughts of Revenge subscale of the ARS (because of its emphasis on violent daydreaming), this study demonstrated that there is a two-way interaction between depressive symptoms and violent daydreaming that predicts suicidality. This may be because individuals in the midst of depression daydream or fantasize about death by suicide, including imagining the

Table 3
Comparison of the Four Interactions of the Anger Rumination Scale Subscales With the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) to Predict Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation (BSS) Scores
Correlations

Model	<i>F</i> for Set	<i>R</i> ² for Set	<i>t</i>	Significance	Zero-Order	Part
1 (Constant)	3.827	.199	4.346	.000		
BDI			0.698	.487	.213	.071
Understanding Causes			-1.318	.191	.207	-.134
Angry Afterthoughts			0.743	.460	.355	.076
Angry Memories			0.705	.483	.345	.072
Thoughts of Revenge			1.945	.055	.409	.198
3 (Constant)	4.733	.119	5.445	.000		
BDI			-2.584	.012	.213	-.240
Understanding Causes			0.262	.794	.207	.024
Angry Afterthoughts			-0.854	.396	.355	-.079
Angry Memories			0.581	.563	.345	.054
Thoughts of Revenge			-1.029	.307	.409	-.096
BDI × Causes			-1.542	.127	.241	-.143
BDI × Afterthoughts			2.338	.022	.303	.217
BDI × Memories			-0.097	.923	.279	-.009
BDI × Thoughts of Revenge			3.716	.000	.410	.346

Note: Dependent variable: BSS.

details of their death, how others will react, and previous suicidal acts (if they have previously engaged in suicidal behaviors). This violent daydreaming may serve the purpose, ironically, of increasing positive affect because of the release from pain and suffering that suicide would bring. Yet, this study suggests that daydreaming about violence may actually increase suicidality. In fact, according to Joiner's (2005) theory, daydreaming about violence may serve as a method of mental practice that increases an individual's ability to enact lethal self-injury due to habituation to pain and provocation. Further analyses demonstrated that the effects of this two-way interaction are specific to the properties of the Thoughts of Revenge subscale rather than to a general tendency to ruminate on angry affect.

Daydreaming about death may also serve as a link that connects three major theories of suicidal behavior: suicide as escape from negative affect (Baumeister, 1990), the role of emotion dysregulation proposed by Linehan (1993), and the acquired capability to enact lethal self-injury proposed by Joiner (2005). A suicidal individual may view death as an escape from pain

and suffering, may daydream about death by suicide and revenge in order to feel more positive emotions, and may do this more frequently as suicidality increases, and while engaging in violent daydreams simultaneously increase his or her ability to enact lethal self-injury. Thus, when considering the effects of violent daydreaming on suicide, these three theories complement each other well.

There may be additional adverse effects to violent daydreaming that increase suicidality other than an increase in suicidal desire and the acquired capability to enact lethal self-injury. Another important component of Joiner's (2005) theory of suicide is that in order for an individual to complete suicide, they must have a perceived dearth of belongingness with others. Thus, even though an individual may have the ability to die by suicide, he or she will not have the desire to die unless he or she feels interpersonally disconnected. Engaging in daydreams about revenge while suicidal may also decrease feelings of belongingness; this hypothesis is supported by the finding that ruminating about revenge has been shown to hinder forgiveness of others (Barber et al., 2005).

It is also important to note that the Thoughts of Revenge main effect alone predicted suicidality. Individuals who daydream about violence and revenge in general, even outside the context of depression, may be at greater risk for suicidality because of the hazardous effects that this form of emotion dysregulation has on habituating to violence and to damaging interpersonal relationships—effects that may be magnified in the midst of depression.

The findings of this study also have bearing on the assessment and treatment of suicidal behavior. In attempting to determine an individual's risk for suicide, clinicians should explore the use of violent daydreaming as an emotion regulation strategy. If an individual reports engaging in violent daydreams about suicide and revenge, the therapist may want to designate the patient as being at higher risk for suicide (all other things being equal), and it may be important for the therapist to monitor this behavior throughout the course of treatment. Therapists may also want to explain to the patient that even if engaging in these daydreams may make them feel better at the time, it may actually increase their suicidality and potential to die by suicide; teaching of alternative, more adaptive mood regulation skills seems indicated. Assessment of these daydreams may also serve as an important treatment outcome indicator, with the frequency and duration of these daydreams decreasing as effective therapy progresses.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically examine the function and use of violent daydreaming in suicidal individuals. Although this study was able to show that there is a two-way interaction between

depression and violent daydreaming that predicts increased suicidality, there are some limitations to what can be inferred from the results of this study. Currently, there are no measures available that assess the tendency to daydream about suicide itself. This study used a measure of daydreaming about violence and revenge in general, so more evidence is needed to confirm that suicidal individuals are actually daydreaming about suicide, and not just violence in general. The effects of violent daydreaming on positive affect should also be examined to determine if violent daydreaming actually increases positive affect, as clinical anecdotes would suggest. Also, the effects of violent daydreaming on actual suicide attempts and completions must be examined to determine if daydreaming about death actually increases the ability to enact lethal self-injury. Finally, future studies should examine the effects of violent daydreaming in a clinical population and verify the validity of the use of violent daydreaming in clinically suicidal individuals.

In conclusion, as suicidal individuals progress from an initial desire for death to preparing and planning for their death, they may engage in more frequent violent daydreaming, which may not only increase suicidality but may also increase the ability to die by suicide. These daydreams and fantasies may consist of details about the methods that they will use to take their lives, how others may react to their deaths, and/or previous suicide attempts. This is because individuals who are feeling suicidal may engage in these daydreams or fantasies of death as a way to paradoxically increase positive affect and in doing so increase their vulnerability to suicide.

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