When You Put Things Out of Mind, Where Do They Go?

Daniel M. Wegner
Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1863)

Winter Notes on Summer Impressions
Rebound

Bell Rings Per Minute

Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White (1987)
Chronicity

Personally Relevant Intrusive Thoughts Outside the Laboratory

Mean number of thoughts between meals over four days

Mean rating of discomfort (0-100)

Trinder & Salkovskis (1994)
Ironic Process Theory

An intentional operating process searches for mental contents to create the desired mental state

- Effortful
- Conscious
- Interruptible

An ironic monitoring process searches for mental contents that signal the failure of mental control

- Automatic
- Unconscious
- Uninterruptible

Wegner (1994)
Hyperaccessibility

Color-naming Reaction Times (msec)


NONTARGET WORD

TARGET WORD

Suppress

Think

Low Load

High Load

Perception

“Try not to see the duck” vs. Try to see the rabbit”

“Try not to see the cat” vs. Try to see the swan”

Seconds holding down key to report seeing target

Slesar & Mack (2005)
Deception

Instruction: Identify the target object to the addressee

Percentage of foil-contrasting modifiers (e.g., “small triangle”)

Lane, Groisman, & Ferreira (2006)
Brain Activation

Task blocks (6 functional runs, task order reversed for 3)

- 120 sec **Suppression** with button press for white bear thought
- 28 sec **Manual response** with button press at light onset
- 120 sec **Free thought** with button press for white bear thought

Right DLPFC: Sustained activation during suppression task
Bilateral ACC: Transient activation during suppression intrusions
Wishes suppressed during the day assert themselves in dreams

Sigmund Freud (1900): *The Interpretation of Dreams*
Dream Rebound

Mean mentions of person in dream reports

![Graph showing mean mentions of person in dream reports with categories: Mention, Expression, Suppression. The graph compares Target and Nontarget conditions.](Wegner, Wenzlaff, & Kozak (2004))
Asymmetric Reminding
Asymmetric Reminding

Priming Asymmetry During Suppression

Najmi & Wegner (in press)
Asymmetric Reminding

Prime appears 50 msec before target lexical decision

Suppress: Mountain

Low Load

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime</th>
<th>Target</th>
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<td>Climb</td>
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High Load

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Najmi & Wegner (in press)
Psychopathology
Psychopathology

Following instructions to suppress relevant thoughts:

- Increases thoughts of smoking during quitting (Toll, Sobell, Wagner, & Sobell, 2001)
- Increases fear of dentists (Muris, Jongh, Merckelbach, Postema, & Vet, 1998)
- Reduces immune response (Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998)
- Increases distress in rape survivors suffering from PTSD (Shipherd & Beck, 1999)
Psychopathology

Dispositional thought suppression predicts:

- Depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994)
- Poor coping in accident victims (Aaron, Zaglul, & Emery, 1999)
- Dissociative memory experiences (Muris & Merkelbach, 1997)
When you put things out of mind, they never really leave
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