Cognitive Responses Commonly Used by College Students in the Context of Depression and their Consequent Manifestation as Risky Behaviors: An Integrative Review of Literature

Yuliya Bandurovych
yuliya.bandurovych@gmail.com

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College students with depression, how do they think and act?
An Integrative Review of Literature

**Background:**
An important issue facing college students and college counseling centers across the United States is depression and related symptoms (Gallagher, 2009). Depression is characterized by the occurrence of five or more of the following symptoms within a two-week timeframe: depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, significant weight loss, insomnia/hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation, loss of energy, feeling of worthlessness, diminished ability to concentrate, or suicidal ideation (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2013). In 2010, the Global Burden Study considered major depressive disorder the 19th most prevalent disease in the world and the second leading cause of disability (Ferrari et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2013). A national survey conducted by the American College Health Association (2012) revealed that approximately 30% of college students reported depressive symptoms that affected their ability to function at some time in the past year.

Individuals struggling with depression often focus their attention on negative stimuli or evaluate an event in a way that intensifies negative emotions (Ahles et al., 2015). The process of evaluating a life event is called a cognitive response (Ahles et al., 2015). Cognitive responses are the cognition portion of coping with life stresses, as opposed to the affective (feeling) or behavior (action) aspects. Maladaptive cognitive responses to acute stressors may lead to risky behaviors.

**Research Questions:**
1. What are the cognitive responses commonly used among college students with depression?
2. What risky behaviors are associated with the use of maladaptive cognitive responses among college students with depression?

**Conceptual Framework:**

**Definitions:**
- **Negative cognitive style:** tendency (1) to attribute negative events to stable and global causes; (2) to catastrophize the consequences of negative events; and (3) to view the self as flawed and/or deficient following negative events
- **Rumination:** an enduring focus on the self or on dysphoric affect states
- **Brooding:** perseverative cognitive focus on negative content about the self, world, or future
- **Reflection:** an openness to explore negative feelings and a sense that one’s feelings are clear and controllable

**Methods:**
A computerized search of literature was conducted using Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, and Cumulative Index to Nursing and Health Literature (CINAHL). The search terms were as follows: depression, college students, university students, graduate students, undergraduate students, cognitive response, cognitive style, cognitive form, response style, emotional regulation strategy, and cognitive process.

**Inclusion criteria:** research articles published within journals in the last 5 years, available in English, population being studied must have been college students

**Exclusion criteria:** articles with mixed study populations (i.e. college students and students from professional training centers) and/or those that focused on anxiety more than depression were excluded (see Figure 2)

**Results & Discussion:**
Five studies examined relationships between cognitive responses and depression. These studies provided a better understanding of two cognitive responses associated with depression — negative cognitive style and rumination (subtypes of brooding and reflection). Negative cognitive style was found to be associated with a history of depression. The brooding subtype of rumination was found to be predictive of future depressive symptoms.

Eight studies discussed risky behavior (i.e. suicidal ideation, unhealthy eating practices, sleep onset latency, excessive alcohol consumption, and career indecision), in addition to depression. Research shows that among women, stress-related symptoms may increase the risk for suicidal ideation to the extent that they increase brooding and depressive symptoms. (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). Likewise, brooding was associated with binge eating (Gordon et al., 2012). Rumination, as a whole, was associated with sleep onset latency (Pillai et al., 2014).

Increased alcohol consumption was found to be positively correlated with depression among individuals utilizing alcohol as a negative coping mechanism (Ralston & Palfai, 2012). Foster et al. (2014) revealed that this relationship was stronger among men than women. Career indecision was also positively associated with depression (Gadassi, Waser & Gati, 2015). The involvement of cognitive responses within the context of depression and drinking, as well as depression and career indecision was not explored in the research studies included in this literature review.

**Nursing Practice Implications:**
Nursing practice should focus on preventing and correcting dysfunctional beliefs about the usefulness of rumination. Interventions that reduce brooding and/or enhance self-reflection might be particularly beneficial (ex. art therapy). In addition to prevention, efforts can be made to directly address risky behaviors. For example, Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) have been successfully incorporated into pre-appointment paperwork to identify students at risk for depression and alcohol abuse (Geisner et al., 2012). These brief screenings can be incorporated into nursing assessment in student health clinics and other health facilities frequented by college students.