The mediating role of repetitive negative thinking and experiential avoidance on the relationship between childhood trauma and depression

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma (CT), including sexual, emotional, physical abuse, and physical and emotional neglect, is one of the most consistent predictors of major depressive disorder (MDD). It is a widespread problem, affecting between 3 and 32% of the population (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Scher, Forde, McQuaid, & Stein, 2004). Childhood trauma has been associated with a range of psychological disorders such as personality disorders (Zhang, Chow, Wang, Dai, & Xiao, 2012), substance use (Tucci, Kerr-Corrêa, & Souza-Formigon, 2010) or PTSD (Shenk, Putnam, & Noll, 2012). Ample evidence also exists for the assumption that childhood trauma is related to an elevated risk of depression. But, repetitive negative thinking has been primarily studied in disorder specific expressions (e.g., rumination in depression or worry in generalized anxiety disorder).

However, the causal mechanisms between childhood trauma and the development of depression have not been sufficiently studied. Possible mediators of the relation between childhood trauma and depression are diverse, but clarifying studies are still rare. A number of potential mediators of the relationship between childhood trauma and depression have been identified in the literature such as emotional regulation (Hopner, Berking, Bockting, & Ebert, 2016) and maladaptive cognitive strategies (Orue, Calvete, & Padilla, 2014; Rezaei, Ghazanfari, & Rezaee, 2016). For example, Rezaei et al. (2016) identified early maladaptive schemas (EMSs) and emotional schemas (ES) as mediators of the relationship between general childhood trauma and adult depression in college students. It is worth mentioning that studies have conceptualized childhood trauma as a distal risk factor that triggers the development of maladaptive behaviors (such as experiential avoidance) and cognitive (such as repetitive negative thinking) styles that, in turn, leave the individual vulnerable to depression (Calvete, Orue, & Hankin, 2013; Choi et al., 2017; Reddy, Pickett, & Orcutt, 2006).

Another significant link between childhood trauma and depression may be the repetitive negative thinking (RNT) following childhood trauma (O'Mahen, Karl, Moberly, & Fedock, 2015). Repetitive negative thinking, defined as a style of thinking about one’s problems (current, past, or future) or negative experiences that shows three key characteristics: the thinking is repetitive, it is at least partly intrusive, and it is difficult to disengage from (Ehrling et al., 2011), is increasingly understood to be a transdiagnostic process related to mood and anxiety psychopathology (Watkins, 2008). For example, individuals with major depressive disorders have been shown to ruminate (a specific repetitive negative thinking) excessively about the symptoms of depression, their causes and consequences (Lackner & Fresco, 2016).

With regards to depression, several correlational (Stone & Gibb, 2015), experimental (Fawcett et al., 2015), longitudinal (Calvete et al., 2013; Orue et al., 2014), comparative (Wahl et al., 2011) and neuroscience (Kühn, Vanderhasselt, Raedt, & Gallinat, 2012) studies have indicated that repetitive negative thinking contributes to the development and maintenance of depression. But, repetitive negative thinking has been primarily studied in disorder specific expressions (e.g., rumination in depression or worry in generalized anxiety disorder).

This study therefore seeks to examine the mediating role of repetitive negative thinking in the relationship between women’s reports of childhood trauma and their depressive symptoms. A large number of studies with clinical and non-clinical samples have examined rumination (a specific repetitive negative thinking pattern) as the mechanism between childhood trauma and depression. For instance in a low-income women sample, rumination has been found to mediate the relationship between childhood trauma (emotional abuse) and depressive symptoms (O'Mahen et al., 2015). Among the females of Raes and Hermans (2008) study, rumination fully mediated the relationship between sexual abuse and the number of major depressive episodes. In addition, in a mixed sample, rumination has shown to partially mediate the relationship between emotional maltreatment and depressive symptoms (Drost, van der Does, van Hemert, Penninx, & Spinholven, 2014).

Another significant link between childhood trauma and depression may be experiential avoidance (EA) following childhood trauma (Rezaei et al., 2016). Experiential avoidance represents an unwillingness to stay in contact with unwanted inner experiences (i.e., of efforts to control or avoid unpleasant emotions, upsetting memories, troubling...