Hopelessness Depression in Depressed Inpatient Adolescents

Mark A. Whisman
Yale University

Aureen Pinto
University of Rochester

The hopelessness theory of depression hypothesizes the existence of a hopelessness subtype of depression, characterized by its specific cause, symptoms, course, therapy, and prevention. Data from depressed inpatient adolescents (N = 160) were used to evaluate (a) the relation between hopelessness and the hypothesized symptoms of hopelessness depression; and (b) the latent structure of the relation between hopelessness and the symptoms of hopelessness depression, to test for a hopelessness depression taxon (i.e., subtype). Results suggest that hopelessness was related to the hypothesized symptoms of hopelessness depression, treated singly and in combination. However, results from the application of Meehl and Yonce's (1994) MAMBAC taxometric analytic procedure, using hopelessness and the symptoms of hopelessness depression as taxonic indicators, did not support the existence of a hopelessness depression latent taxon. These results suggest that hopelessness depression may best be conceptualized as a dimension or continuum versus a category or subtype.

KEY WORDS: depression; subtype; hopelessness; taxometric.

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2Address all correspondence concerning this article to Mark A. Whisman, Yale University, Department of Psychology, P.O. Box 208205, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-8205.
The hopelessness theory of depression (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989), a recent revision of the reformulated helplessness theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), hypothesizes the "existence in nature of an as-yet unidentified subtype of depression—hopelessness depression" (Abramson et al., 1989, p. 358). Abramson et al. hypothesized that this subtype can be differentiated from other subtypes of depression with respect to its cause, symptoms, course, therapy, and prevention. Specifically, Abramson et al. propose a causal chain in which negative life events act as "occasion setters" for individuals to become hopeless (a necessary and sufficient proximal cause of hopelessness depression) if they infer (a) stable and global attributions for the cause of the event, and/or (b) negative consequences because of the event, and/or (c) negative characteristics about the self given the event. Although most prior studies have evaluated the hypothesized causes of hopelessness depression (as reviewed by Abramson, Alloy, & Metalsky, 1995), the symptoms of hopelessness depression have also been a focus of recent research.

Abramson et al. (1989) hypothesized that the symptoms of hopelessness depression include retarded initiation of voluntary responses (a motivational symptom) and sad affect (an emotional symptom)—both of which were described in the reformulated helplessness theory—and also suicidal ideation/behavior, lack of energy, apathy, psychomotor retardation, sleep disturbance, difficulty in concentration, and mood-exacerbated negative cognitions. In addition, Abramson et al. hypothesized that low self-esteem and/or dependency, "although not necessarily symptoms of hopelessness depression . . . sometimes will accompany the other hypothesized symptoms" (p. 363) under specified conditions. Specifically, these latter symptoms are hypothesized to accompany the other symptoms when an individual infers (a) internal, stable, and global causes for negative life events; and/or (b) negative characteristics about the self given such events. To date, however, there have been few studies that have examined the validity of the hypothesized symptoms of hopelessness depression, through examining the covariation of the symptoms with proposed causal components of hopelessness depression.

Spangler, Simons, Monroe, and Thase (1993) examined the relation between attributional style, life stress, and the hopelessness symptom profile in a sample of depressed outpatient adults. Results from their study provided partial support for Abramson et al.'s (1989) model, in that participants who met the hopelessness criteria (i.e., those who had both an attributional diathesis and a negative life stressor) differed from other patients with respect to some depression symptoms (i.e., cognitive, affect, and psychomotor symptoms) but not with respect to other symptoms (i.e., motivation, energy, and suicidal ideation symptoms). Whisman, Miller, Nor-