

# Experiential avoidance as a generalized psychological vulnerability: Comparisons with coping and emotion regulation strategies

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## Abstract

Extending previous work, we conducted two studies concerning the toxic influences of experiential avoidance (EA) as a core mechanism in the development and maintenance of psychological distress, and disruption of pleasant, engaging, and spontaneous activity. Of particular interest was whether EA accounted for relationships between coping and emotion regulation strategies on anxiety-related pathology (Study 1) and psychological distress and hedonic functioning over the course of a 21-day monitoring period (Study 2). In Study 1, EA mediated the effects of maladaptive coping, emotional responses styles, and uncontrollability on anxiety-related distress (e.g., anxiety sensitivity, trait anxiety, suffocation fears, and body sensation fears). In Study 2, EA completely mediated the effects of two emotion regulation strategies (i.e., suppression and reappraisal) on daily negative and positive experiences and was associated with diminished daily positive affective experiences and healthy life appraisals, diminished frequency of positive events and more frequent negative life events, and greater negative affective experiences. The present data show that cognitive reappraisal, a primary process of traditional cognitive-behavior therapy, was much less predictive of the quality of psychological experiences and events in everyday life compared with EA. Further consideration of experiential avoidance as a generalized diathesis and toxic process will be useful in improving our understanding of the etiology, phenomenology, and treatment of anxiety conditions, general human suffering, and disruptions in hedonic capacity.

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Experiential avoidance is a process involving excessive negative evaluations of unwanted private thoughts, feelings, and sensations, an unwillingness to experience these private events, and deliberate efforts to control or escape from them (Hayes, 1994; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). In some contexts, subtle avoidance or suppressed behavior can be viewed as a self-protective strategy to prevent seemingly disastrous consequences. Examples include trying not to show signs of anxiety during a job interview, controlling feelings of boredom

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during a conversation with a valued person, or worrying in order to control fears about the anticipated threat of confronting a transgressor. In these contexts, experiential avoidance is a relatively benign short-term strategy to manage emotional expression; the negative consequences such as energy expenditure and not being a fully engaged participant from moment to moment may be minimal. Attempting to control anxiety and fear works as long as an individual can still live in a way that is coherent with their core sense of self, and effort and progress can be made toward personally meaningful goals. Experiential avoidance becomes a disordered process when it is applied rigidly and inflexibly such that enormous time, effort, and energy is devoted to managing, controlling, or struggling with unwanted private events. This struggle, in turn, gets in the way of movement toward valued goals, diminishes contact with present experiences, and thus yields impairment in functioning. The unwillingness to remain in contact with negatively evaluated private events, and chronic attempts to alter the form of these events or contexts in which they arise, are proposed to be a stronger contributor to psychopathology than the content (e.g., intensity, frequency, negative valence) of private psychological and emotional experiences (Forsyth, Eifert, & Barrios, *in press*; Hayes et al., 1999).

In clinical and non-clinical samples, experiential avoidance is strongly correlated with measures of general psychopathology (Hayes et al., 2004) and specific measures of anxiety and depression (Forsyth, Parker, & Finlay, 2003; Marx & Sloan, 2005; Roemer, Salters, Raffa, & Orsillo, 2005; Tull, Gratz, Salters, & Roemer, 2004). In response to inductions of acute emotional distress (via panicogenic CO<sub>2</sub> inhalation and hyperventilation challenges), healthy individuals endorsing greater experiential avoidance reported more panic symptoms and perceived uncontrollability (Feldner, Zvolensky, Eifert, & Spira, 2003), even after accounting for other risk factors such as anxiety sensitivity (Karekla, Forsyth, & Kelly, 2004; Spira, Zvolensky, Eifert, & Feldner, 2004). These studies demonstrate that experiential avoidance amplifies anxiety symptomatology in individuals with no history of anxiety-related disorders. Thus, there is evidence that experiential avoidance is not merely a concomitant or consequence of anxiety-related pathology, rather it is a psychological vulnerability for anxiety pathology.

The paradox of experiential avoidance is that attempting to hide or inhibit unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations serves to increase the frequency and distress of these same experiences (Gross, 1998a, 2002; Wegner, 1994) and a sense that one is being inauthentic or disconnected from oneself (John & Gross, 2004). Moreover, chronic emotional avoidance interferes with the pleasures of being fully immersed in any activity, resulting in less frequent positive events and dampened positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003; Kashdan & Steger, *in press*). Rigid attempts to avoid negatively evaluated private experiences apparently lead to more frequent and intense episodes of psychological distress and interference with meaningful life activities.

All human beings will have moments of pain and suffering. This includes experiencing the full spectrum of human emotions, including intense, potentially disturbing states such as panic attacks, and a range of evaluative thoughts including self-doubts about the ability to perform in a particular situation and feeling that one should/ought to be better or present oneself more favorably. The content and form of these events are part of being human and living in the present moment; they are not necessarily problematic or dysfunctional (e.g., thoughts such as I am a loser or I am a banana are just thoughts). Moreover, taking action toward valued goals requires contact with a full range of emotional content, some of it quite painful. This is where experiential avoidance tends to get people into trouble.

In this system, undesired psychological content must be managed first in order to do what is important in life. Here struggle with, and avoidance of, unwanted private events predominates, and the ability to engaged in valued directions is disrupted (Hayes et al., 1999). Such experiential inflexibility, in turn, can yield fusion of a sense of self with thoughts, feelings, and actions, such that an individual is unable to differentiate private emotions, thoughts, images, and memories from the sense of self (e.g., “I am worthless”). In this example, worthlessness must be fixed, the self must be fixed, in order to do what matters. As a consequence, effort and progress toward personally meaningful goals is sacrificed because of an unwillingness to experience and let go of the struggle with unwanted private events. After all, in terms of movement toward the attainment of important goals, potentially unwanted events such as anxious feelings and thoughts can be necessary ingredients (aiding in motivation and perseverance; e.g., Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). With this conceptualization (see Eifert & Forsyth, 2005; Hayes et al., 1999, for more details), experiential avoidance is defined as a core toxic diathesis underlying several other psychological vulnerabilities.

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