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## Emotional avoidance: an experimental test of individual differences and response suppression using biological challenge

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### Abstract

The present study examined the affective consequences of response inhibition during a state of anxiety-related physical stress. Forty-eight non-clinical participants were selected on the basis of pre-experimental differences in emotional avoidance (high versus low) and subjected to four inhalations of 20% carbon dioxide-enriched air. Half of the participants were instructed to inhibit the challenge-induced aversive emotional state, whereas the other half was instructed to simply observe their emotional response. Participants high in emotional avoidance compared to those low in emotional avoidance responded with greater levels of anxiety and affective distress but not physiological arousal. Individuals high in emotional avoidance also reported greater levels of anxiety relative to the low emotional avoidance group when suppressing compared to observing bodily sensations. These findings are discussed in terms of the significance of emotional avoidance processes during physical stress, with implications for better understanding the nature of panic disorder.

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Although the elicitation of negative emotional states is often experienced as “beyond one’s control,” individuals can influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how

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these emotions are experienced or expressed (Richards & Gross, 2000). Emotional avoidance has been suggested to be a fundamental emotion regulation process relevant to panic and other anxiety disorders (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999). At the core of emotional avoidance conceptualizations of anxiety pathology is the view that responding functionally directed at altering the form or frequency of aversive internal experiences (e.g., negative thoughts, bodily sensations) and the contexts that occasion them can be a toxic process that distinguishes normal from disordered experiences of anxiety and fear (Zvolensky & Forsyth, *in press*). Accordingly, emotional avoidance would be expected to have important emotion-processing consequences. In the case of panic disorder, for example, individuals rigidly attempt to escape, avoid, or otherwise limit the duration of somatic responses (Cox, Endler, Swinson, & Norton, 1992). Somewhat paradoxically, these inflexible and context-insensitive emotion avoidance efforts may promote anxiety-related responsiveness over the long term (Hayes et al., 2002).

At this stage of research development, there is no direct experimental psychopathology test of the theoretical predictions derived from an emotional avoidance conceptualization of panic and related interoceptive fear disorders. The present study sought to address two theoretical predictions from the emotional avoidance conceptualization of panic. The first was whether individual differences in emotional avoidance, as indexed by the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ; Hayes et al., 2002), would differentially relate to anxious and fearful responding to challenge-induced bodily sensations. Existing research using the AAQ has found that it is positively correlated with self-reported anxiety (Hayes et al., 2002), yet no studies have examined its explanatory power using a theory-driven multimodal assessment of anxious and fearful responding. Rather than begin to examine such individual differences in a clinical population at this stage of research development, we sought to provide a more conservative test using a non-clinical population. In this way, we could be more confident that observed differences are not simply second-order consequences of having the disorder itself. We expected that persons with a tendency to rigidly avoid emotional experiences compared to persons low in emotional avoidance would be more apt to experience heightened anxious and fearful responding during an acute state of physical stress.

The second focus of the present investigation was to examine how individual differences in emotional avoidance relate to perceived and real “on-line” emotion regulation efforts. We sought to study emotion suppression as a prototypical emotional avoidance strategy. Previous research indicates that inhibiting one’s emotion response to short-term film clips that elicit specific types of negative emotional experiences, including fear (Gross & Levenson, 1995), will decrease reports of distress, diminish expressive behavior, yet result in greater autonomic arousal (e.g., Richards & Gross, 2000). However, none of the existing studies on emotion inhibition have been conducted in a panic-relevant manner, or with consideration of theoretically relevant individual differences in emotional avoidance response styles. We expected that individuals high in emotional avoidance would perceive themselves to be particularly poor at regulating challenge-induced bodily arousal relative to their counterparts low in emotional avoidance. Drawing from basic and applied research on the utility of mindfulness (e.g., Langer & Piper, 1987), we also expected that individuals high in emotional avoidance would report greater levels of anxiety, but not necessarily autonomic arousal, relative to the low emotional avoidance group when attempting to suppress compared to observe challenge-elicited emotion responses.

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