



# Attempted versus successful avoidance: associations with distress, symptoms, and strategies for mental control

Leanne Andrews<sup>a,\*</sup>, Nicholas Troop<sup>b</sup>, Stephen Joseph<sup>c</sup>, Syd Hiskey<sup>a</sup>, Iain Coyne<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Psychology, London Guildhall University, London E1 7NT, UK*

<sup>c</sup>*Department of Psychology, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK*

<sup>d</sup>*Department of Psychology, University of Hull, East Yorkshire HU6 7RX, UK*

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## Abstract

The most widely used measures of avoidance strategies following stressful or traumatic experiences are unidimensional. However, recent work has emphasised the multifactorial nature of avoidance. One intriguing and as yet unexplored distinction is that between attempts at avoidance and successful avoidance. Two studies are reported with the aim of investigating the differential relationships between attempted and successful avoidance and measures of distress and thought control strategies. In the first study 207 participants completed measures of attempted and successful avoidance along with a measure of distress. The results indicated that distress was associated with attempted avoidance but not successful avoidance. In the second study, 143 participants completed measures of attempted and successful avoidance along with measures of thought control strategies and distress. The results of study two replicated those of study one and also found that attempted avoidance was associated with 'punishment' and 'worry' thought control strategies, whereas, successful avoidance was associated with 'social control' strategies. It was concluded that attempts at avoidance that are not successful are maladaptive following stressful or traumatic experiences but successful avoidance is not. These data highlight the importance of identifying and making explicit the distinction between attempted and successful avoidance in future operational definitions.

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## 1. Introduction

The evidence regarding the question of whether avoidance following traumatic or other stressful life events is adaptive or maladaptive is mixed. For example, Perry, Difede, Musngi, Frances, and Jacobsberg (1992) found that severity of avoidant thoughts at 6 months post trauma

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +44-1206-873590.

E-mail address: landre@essex.ac.uk (L. Andrews).

predicted post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at 12 months post trauma. In contrast, Joseph, Yule, and Williams (1994) found that avoidance at 7 months post trauma did not predict distress at 19 months post trauma. These and other similar studies (e.g. Dalgleish, Joseph, Thrasher, Tranah & Yule, 1996; McFarlane, 1988; Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992) have all used the Impact of Event Scale (IES; Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979) to assess avoidance.

The Impact of Event Scale (IES) is a self-report measure which yields a single unidimensional score for avoidance. However, in a recent review of the psychometric properties of the IES, Joseph (2000) emphasised the need for investigation into the multidimensionality of avoidance in order to explain these contradictory findings. Evidence for the multidimensionality of avoidance has been found previously. For example, Williams, Joseph, and Yule (1994), in their study with survivors of the Herald of Free Enterprise, identified three different types of avoidance strategies. These were cognitive (e.g. trying not to think about the event), behavioural (e.g. refusing to talk about the event) and emotional avoidance (e.g. emotional numbing). More recently, Dalgleish, Mathews, and Wood (1999) have put forward a four factor taxonomy of avoidance encompassing automatic and controlled avoidance, and avoidance of the event and of emotions relating to the event. However, as the most widely used measures of avoidance, such as the IES, yield unidimensional avoidance scores, relationships between specific types of avoidance and psychological distress are confounded.

Whilst attention has been directed towards measuring the different facets of avoidance there is one aspect of avoidance that has been neglected. This is the notion of whether *attempting* to avoid trauma related stimuli has the same relationship with subsequent psychological distress as *successfully* avoiding trauma related stimuli. One indication that individuals who attempt to avoid trauma related stimuli do not actually achieve successful avoidance is the association between intrusion and avoidance that is often reported in studies of stressful or traumatic life events. Generally correlations between intrusion and avoidance have been found to range from moderate to strong (e.g. Creamer, Burgess, & Pattison, 1992; Hodgkinson & Joseph, 1995; Horowitz et al., 1979). The presence of both avoidance and intrusion would indicate that attempts to avoid are not actually successful. Again, unidimensional measures of avoidance are not able to investigate attempts to avoid and successful avoidance in order to explore their subsequent relationships with psychopathology.

The two studies described below have used items from the widely used IES avoidance subscale in order to (1) investigate whether it is possible to measure attempted and successful avoidance separately, and (2) to investigate the relationships between attempted and successful avoidance and psychological distress.

## 2. Study one

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Respondents for this study participated in on-line data collection (at <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~shiske/form.html>). Links were provided to this web site from various stress and trauma support sites available on the world wide web. The purpose of the web site was to investigate

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