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# Emotion regulation in action: emotional reactivity in experiential avoidance

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## Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between emotional reactivity (self-report and physiological reactivity) to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral emotion-eliciting stimuli and experiential avoidance (EA). Sixty-two participants were separated into high and low experiential avoiders. Results indicated that high EA participants reported greater emotional experience to both unpleasant and pleasant stimuli compared to low EA participants. In contrast to their heightened reports of emotion, high EA participants displayed attenuated heart rate reactivity to the unpleasant stimuli relative to the low EA participants. These findings are interpreted as reflecting an emotion regulation attempt by high EA participants when confronted with unpleasant emotionally-evocative stimuli.

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## 1. Introduction

Experiential avoidance is a construct that has been gaining attention in recent years. This construct has been operationalized as an individual's unwillingness to experience feelings, physiological sensations, and thoughts, especially those that are negatively evaluated (e.g. fear), as well as attempts to alter the form or frequency of these events and the contexts that occasion them (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Given this definition of the construct, experiential avoidance is thought to be critical to the development and maintenance of psychopathology (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). More specifically, it has been hypothesized that

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psychological problems are not the result of the thoughts or feelings themselves, but rather these problems are the result of the attempts to suppress, avoid, and control such unwanted private events (Hayes, 1987).

Indeed, research has suggested that efforts to avoid unwanted thoughts and feelings may paradoxically produce increases in the severity and frequency of these private events, as well as increases in psychological symptoms (e.g. Marx & Sloan, 2002; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Despite the ultimate maladaptive outcome, individuals continue to engage in experiential avoidance because the immediate effects are seemingly positive in that the avoidance strategy initially results in apparent decreases of emotional intensity/experiences (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). The pattern of a short-term reduction leading to a long-term increases results in a self-amplifying loop that appears to be fairly resistant to change (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999).

The construct of experiential avoidance seems promising and appears to have substantial clinical importance (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Yet, empirical work examining the construct has been sparse. As experiential avoidance is a relatively new construct there has been only one measure developed to index the construct. This measure is called the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ; Hayes et al., 2003) and the items included in the AAQ relate to key aspects of the construct and link experiential avoidance to inaction, the literalness of thoughts, and escape or avoidance of negatively evaluated content. Most studies that have examined this construct have been correlational, such that responses on the AAQ are typically examined in relation to responses or behaviors assumed to be critical to experiential avoidance. For instance, Hayes and colleagues (2003) found that higher scores on the AAQ were related to higher levels of general psychopathology, depression, anxiety, trauma, and a lower quality of life. Marx and Sloan (2002) found that AAQ scores mediated the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and psychological distress over and above emotional expressiveness. Additionally, Bond and Bunce (in press) found that AAQ scores predicted mental health and job performance one year later, over and above negative affectivity and locus of control. Taken together, these studies support the construct of experiential avoidance and the use of the AAQ to index the construct. However, most studies of experiential avoidance have examined participants' self-reports of their experiences and behaviors. Obtaining information on an individual's subjective experience is important, though it is problematic to rely solely on subjective reports as these data may be biased and may not provide a full picture of attempts to regulate private experiences (i.e. thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations). A more informative approach would be to examine additional response channels (i.e. expressive physiology), as well as the relationship between verbal channels and physiological channels of responding (Lang, 1979; Sloan, Strauss, & Wisner, 2001; Sloan, Bradley, Dimoulas, & Lang, 2002).

A multiple channel emotional responding approach was taken by Feldner and colleagues (2003) to examine experiential avoidance. To investigate whether individual differences in experiential avoidance would differentially relate to fearful responding, participants were instructed to observe their emotional response to an aversive biological challenge (i.e. inhalation of 20% carbon dioxide-enriched air). Interestingly, participants scoring high in experiential avoidance responded with greater self-reported levels of anxiety and distress, but displayed comparable levels of physiological (heart rate reactivity) arousal as the low EA participants. These findings were interpreted to indicate that experiential avoidance related to how bodily arousal is experienced rather than reflecting actual (physiological) arousal patterns. The Feldner et al.

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