



A preliminary test of the role of experiential avoidance in post-event functioning

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Abstract

Experiential avoidance is the unwillingness to experience unwanted thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations and an individual's attempts to alter, avoid, or escape those experiences. The aim of the current studies was to broaden previous research indicating that experiential avoidance often leads to the development and maintenance of psychological distress. Results indicated that experiential avoidance is significantly correlated with psychological distress and post-traumatic symptomatology over and above other measures of psychological functioning. Limitations and implications for treatment and prevention of psychological distress are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Experiential avoidance (or escape) occurs when an individual is unwilling to approach or remain in contact with internal experiences (such as thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, or memories) and thus engages in strategies designed to avoid, alter or escape those experiences (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Unfortunately, there is mounting evidence that attempts to avoid internal

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experiences may paradoxically increase their frequency and associated distress (e.g., Purdon, 1999; Wegner, 1994).¹ Further, many behaviors aimed at experiential escape or avoidance, such as substance use, dissociation, self-injurious behavior and behavioral avoidance, are in and of themselves problematic and life interfering (Hayes et al., 1996). Thus, experiential escape or avoidance has been conceptualized as functionally underlying many forms of psychopathology (e.g., Orsillo & Batten, in press; Orsillo, Roemer, Block, LeJeune, & Herbert, in press; Hayes et al., 1996; Polusny & Follette, 1995).

Recently, the role of experiential avoidance in post-traumatic event functioning has become a specific focus of interest. Coping styles likely to be reflective of emotional avoidance, such as wishful thinking and attempted suppression of negative material, have been shown to be associated with post-traumatic symptomatology across samples of female assault victims (Valentiner, Foa, Riggs, & Gershuny, 1996), ambulance workers (Clohessy & Ehlers, 1999), motor vehicle accident victims (Nightingale & Williams, 2000), Gulf-War veterans (Benotsch et al., 2000), and African American youth exposed to inner-city violence (Dempsey, 2002; Dempsey, Overstreet, & Moely, 2000). Further, the paradoxical effects of thought suppression, one form of experiential avoidance, have been shown to be particularly strong among women with rape-related PTSD (Shipherd & Beck, 1999). Also, there is preliminary evidence that among female assault victims, women who experience a peak of symptoms earlier post-trauma report less subsequent depression and PTSD compared to those who experience a delayed peak of post-event symptoms following the assault (Gilboa-Schechtman & Foa, 2001). This finding may reflect the long-term effects of experiential avoidance on the development of later symptomatology.

A series of recent studies have directly assessed the importance of experiential avoidance using the acceptance and action questionnaire (AAQ) among a specific group of trauma survivors; survivors of child sexual assault (CSA). Experiential avoidance has been demonstrated to be more severe among individuals with a history of CSA than in those without this history (Batten, Follette, & Aban, 2001). Additionally, experiential avoidance has been associated with psychological impairment in individuals with a history of sexual victimization (Polusny, Rosenthal, Aban, & Follette, 2004). Finally, Marx and Sloan (2002) found that experiential avoidance mediated the relationship between CSA status and psychological distress.

Taken together, these findings suggest that experiential avoidance may play a significant role in the development and maintenance of psychological difficulties following a traumatic event. However, to date, research directly examining the role of experiential avoidance among trauma victims has been limited to CSA survivors. The present paper attempts to assess the role of experiential avoiding in predicting post-trauma functioning using more diverse samples across three studies.

¹ Although there is growing clinical and experimental evidence that experiential avoidance is associated with distress, Bonanno and his colleagues (e.g., Bonanno & Keltner, 1997; Bonanno, Noll, Putnam, O'Neill, & Trickett, 2003; Consedine, Magai, & Bonanno, 2002) have suggested that disclosure of emotional experience may in fact be associated with increased distress.

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