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Stressful tasks, state levels of experiential avoidance and emotion regulation: How are they related?

Kyra Bebus, BS; Meaghan Lewis; PhD; Amy Naugle, PhD;
Tabitha DiBacco, BA; & Allie Mann, BS
Western Michigan University



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INTRODUCTION

- Experiential avoidance (EA): An unwillingness to experience aversive private events associated with escape/avoidance of these events [1].
- EA both mediated the longitudinal relationship and predicted changes in fear and distress disorders [2].
- Emotion/cognitive regulation strategies are covert and difficult to be aware of, so participants may struggle to accurately self-report [3].
- Understanding EA as a class of observable behaviors may improve methods for identifying contextual cues linked to avoidance.
- **AIM:** Evaluate how the avoidance of physical and social discomfort are related to emotion regulation.
- **HYPOTHESIS:** Individuals higher in state levels of EA following uncomfortable physical and social tasks will also experience greater emotional dysregulation.

METHODS

- **PARTICIPANTS:** Undergraduates (N=160) were recruited via convenience sampling.
- **MEASURES:** Participants completed the Trier Social Stress Test (TSST) [4] and cold pressor task (see Figure 1 to right) [5] in counterbalanced order. Participants completed the State Measure of EA (SMEA) [6], State Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale (S-DERS) [7] at baseline and following both tasks. Participants also completed the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire – II (AAQ-II) [8] and Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (MEAQ) [9] to assess trait EA.



Figure 1. Cold pressor apparatus

RESULTS

Table 1
Summary of Pearson's Correlations of Task Endurance, Task Completion, State Emotion Regulation, State Experiential Avoidance & Trait Experiential Avoidance

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Cold pressor endurance	-												
2. Speech endurance	.13	-											
3. Arithmetic endurance	.09	.23**	-										
4. Baseline SMEA	-.14	-.13	-.08	-									
5. SMEA post-cold pressor	-.29**	-.03	-.07	.33**	-								
6. SMEA post-TSST	.01	-.15	-.30**	.33**	.24**	-							
7. S-DERS post-cold pressor	-.04	.01	.001	.31**	.18**	.14	-						
8. S-DERS post-TSST	-.00	-.11	-.09	.34**	.15	.50***	.55***	-					
9. Cold pressor completion	.89***	.14	.05	-.20**	-.32**	.01	-.07	-.07	-				
10. Speech completion	.07	.46***	.09	.07	.10	.03	.10	.01	.01	-			
11. Arithmetic completion	.10	.17*	.71***	-.18**	-.11	-.30**	-.10	.12	.12	.12	-		
12. AAQ-II	-.04	-.13	-.08	.40**	.17*	.26**	.52**	.38**	-.10	-.05	-.12	-	
13. MEAQ	-.12	-.22**	-.14	.39**	.12	.19*	.25**	.25**	-.13	.02	-.18*	.40**	-

Note. N = 160, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

RESULTS - CONTINUED

Table 2
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Predicting Trait Experiential Avoidance (AAQ-II)

Block	Variable	B	SE B	β	t	R ²	R ² Δ	F
1)	SMEA post-cold pressor	.06	.16	.03	.39	.30	.28	16.70***
	SMEA post-TSST	.34	.18	.15	1.89			
	S-DERS post-TSST	.03	.06	.05	.49			
2)	S-DERS post-cold pressor	.45	.08	.47	5.63***			
	Cold pressor intensity	-.05	.03	-.14	-1.64	.35	.32	11.64***
	Speech intensity	.06	.02	.23	2.83**			
	Arithmetic intensity	.00	.02	.01	.22			

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

DISCUSSION

- **SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** Baseline state EA is associated with state EA post-cold pressor and post-TSST, state emotion regulation post-cold pressor and post-TSST, completion of the cold pressor and arithmetic tasks, and trait EA. Trait EA is related to arithmetic endurance and completion, state EA post-cold pressor and post-TSST, and state emotion regulation post-cold pressor and post-TSST. State emotion regulation post-cold pressor and speech intensity ratings predict 35% of the variance observed with trait EA. State emotion regulation post-cold pressor was the best contributor to the model.
- **INTERPRETATIONS:** Given that subjective intensity of a socially uncomfortable task and emotion regulation of a physically painful task predicts trait EA, it may be beneficial to teach emotion regulation strategies to clients that struggle with avoidance of both physical and social discomfort (e.g., chronic pain, social phobia).
- **LIMITATIONS:** Generalizability may be lacking due to the contrived nature of the study and selection bias, the study relied on self-report methodologies, and few contexts were tested.
- **FUTURE DIRECTIONS:** Testing a clinical sample (e.g., chronic pain, social phobia) that may be higher in EA, assessing the influence of acceptance training across contexts, and investigating the influence of EA in more situations.

CONCLUSION

- The covert experience of trait EA can be predicted by emotion regulation in a physically uncomfortable task and the subjective intensity endured in a socially uncomfortable task, indicating that contextual variables must be evaluated when developing treatment plans for clients that are high avoiders.
- Rather than diagnosing and treating based on categories, it may be more beneficial to classify psychopathologies dimensionally and to treat based on contextual variables that are relevant to the needs of each individual client.

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Contact

Kyra Bebus, BS
kyra.bebus@wmich.edu
Western Michigan University

