Psychological Flexibility Moderates the Relation of Distress Tolerance and Heavy Drinking Affective Avoidance

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Introduction

- Heavy alcohol use is associated with numerous behavioral problems[1]
- Distress tolerance (DT) and psychological flexibility (PF) are inversely associated with alcohol related problems[2-3]
- Low DT is associated with engaging in heavy alcohol use to avoid distressing private experiences,[4] which may be supported by negative reinforcement
- Elements of PF, such as acceptance, limiting behavioral control of cognitions, and value-guided behavioral action[5] may support effective actions when distressed
- Indeed, PF moderates the psychiatric symptom-marijuana abuse relation[6]
- Thus, PF may attenuate the relation of distressing internal experiences and emotion motivated substance use behavior, though PF has not been evaluated as a moderator of the DT-affective avoidance relation in the context of alcohol use

Hypothesis

Psychological flexibility will moderate the relation of distress tolerance and heavy drinking affective avoidance.

Method

- N = 228; M_{age} = 19.2; *SD* = 1.4; 92% White; 73% Female
- Online Survey
  - Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS)[7]
  - Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II)[8]
  - Risky, Impulsive, & Self-Destructive Behavior Questionnaire (RISQ)[9]

Results

Table 1

Moderation Analysis Evaluating Heavy Drinking Affective Avoidance as a Function of Distress Tolerance and Psychological Flexibility

Model	Coeff.	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Constant	.415	1.498	.277	.782	[-2.537, 3.367]
Sex	-.139	.175	-.797	.426	[-0.484, 0.205]
Age	.005	.054	.089	.929	[-0.101, 0.111]
DT	.574	.346	1.656	.099	[-0.109, 1.256]
PF	.036	.029	1.246	.214	[-0.021, 0.092]
DT x PF	-.022	.009	-2.383	.018	[-0.039, -0.004]

Note. DT = Distress Tolerance; PF = Psychological Flexibility. ΔR^2 = .022. F(1, 222) = 5.6798. Bootstrapped samples = 5000.

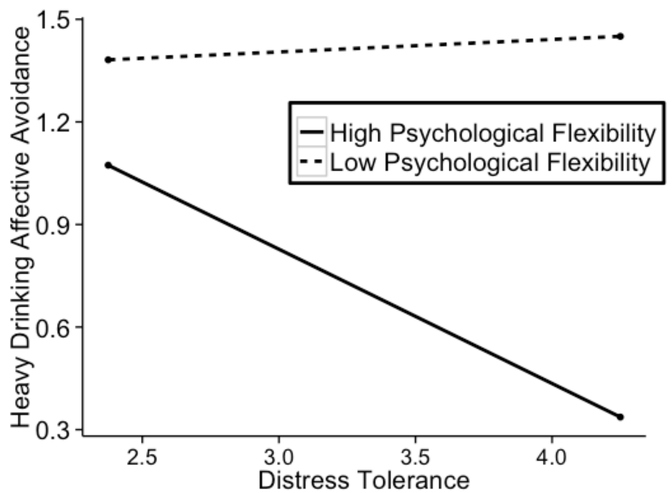

Figure 1. Simple slope analysis of heavy drinking affective avoidance predicted from distress tolerance for high (+*1SD*) and low (-*1SD*) psychological flexibility.

High psychological flexibility is associated with a stronger negative relation of distress tolerance and heavy drinking affective avoidance.

Table 2

Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliabilities

Measure	1	2	3
1. DTS	-		
2. HAU	-.29*	-	
3. AAQ-II	.61*	-.31*	-
M	3.27	0.95	35.24
SD	0.90	1.20	9.44
α	.92	.79	.92

Note. DTS = Distress Tolerance Scale; HAU = Heavy Alcohol Use; AAQ = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II.
*p < .001.

Discussion

- DT and PF highly correlated, suggesting possible construct overlap
- DT and PF were correlated with heavy drinking affective avoidance
- PF moderated the DT-heavy drinking affective avoidance relation, such that DT was associated with affective avoidance at high levels of PF only
- PF may be a particularly productive intervention target when seeking to enhance the effect of DT skills for those who drink to avoid emotion

Limitations

- Limited diversity and a non-clinical sample
- Use of single factor measure of PF
- Cross-sectional data prevents causal interpretation

Future Directions

- Evaluation in diverse and clinical samples
- Assessment of PF using multifactor surveys and/or multimethod designs
- Behavioral measures and longitudinal designs

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