

# Does Experiential Avoidance Weaken the Protective Effects of Religiosity & Spirituality on Depression?

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## INTRO

- Experiential Avoidance (EA) refers to efforts to avoid or suppress unwanted internal experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions), even when this leads to harm or prevents adaptive functioning
- EA is consistently linked to higher depression and reduced psychological flexibility
- Religiosity and Spirituality (R/S) are often associated with lower depression, promoting meaning, values, and connection
- When EA is low, individuals may engage with their faith in an open and accepting way—using it to confront challenges and reduce depressive symptoms
- When EA is high, it can interfere with one’s ability to engage with faith in a flexible, values-driven manner. In these cases, faith may serve as a tool for avoiding difficult emotions, which can weaken or negate its mental health benefits
- There is some evidence that faith is most effective at supporting well-being when paired with openness and psychological flexibility, as emphasized in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).
- This study tests EA as a moderator of the R/S–depression relationship, specifically examining whether high EA weakens the protective effects of R/S

## HYPOTHESES

- H1: Higher levels of EA → higher depressive symptoms.
- H2: Higher R/S → lower depressive symptoms.
- H3: EA will moderate the relationship between R/S and depression:
  - High EA + High R/S → weaker protective effect
  - Low EA + High R/S → stronger protective effect

## METHODS

- 1,154 undergraduate students completed an online survey via Qualtrics.
- Depression: PHQ-9 (Patient Health Questionnaire).
- Religious Fundamentalism: Full multi-item RF Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger).
- Religiosity: Self-rated item—“How religious are you?”
- Spirituality: Self-rated item—“How spiritual are you?”
- Experiential Avoidance (EA): Experiential Avoidance Rating Scale (EARS, 2023).
- Bivariate correlations to examine basic relationships
- Multiple regression analyses to assess main effects of R/S and EA on depression
- Moderation tested using Hayes PROCESS (Model 1), examining interaction terms (EA × Rtotal; EA × Religiosity)
- Significance set at  $p < .05$ ; all confidence intervals = 95%

## RESULTS

Table 1. Multiple Regression Predicting Depression from EA and R/S Variables (Main effects only; interaction terms tested separately and found non-significant)

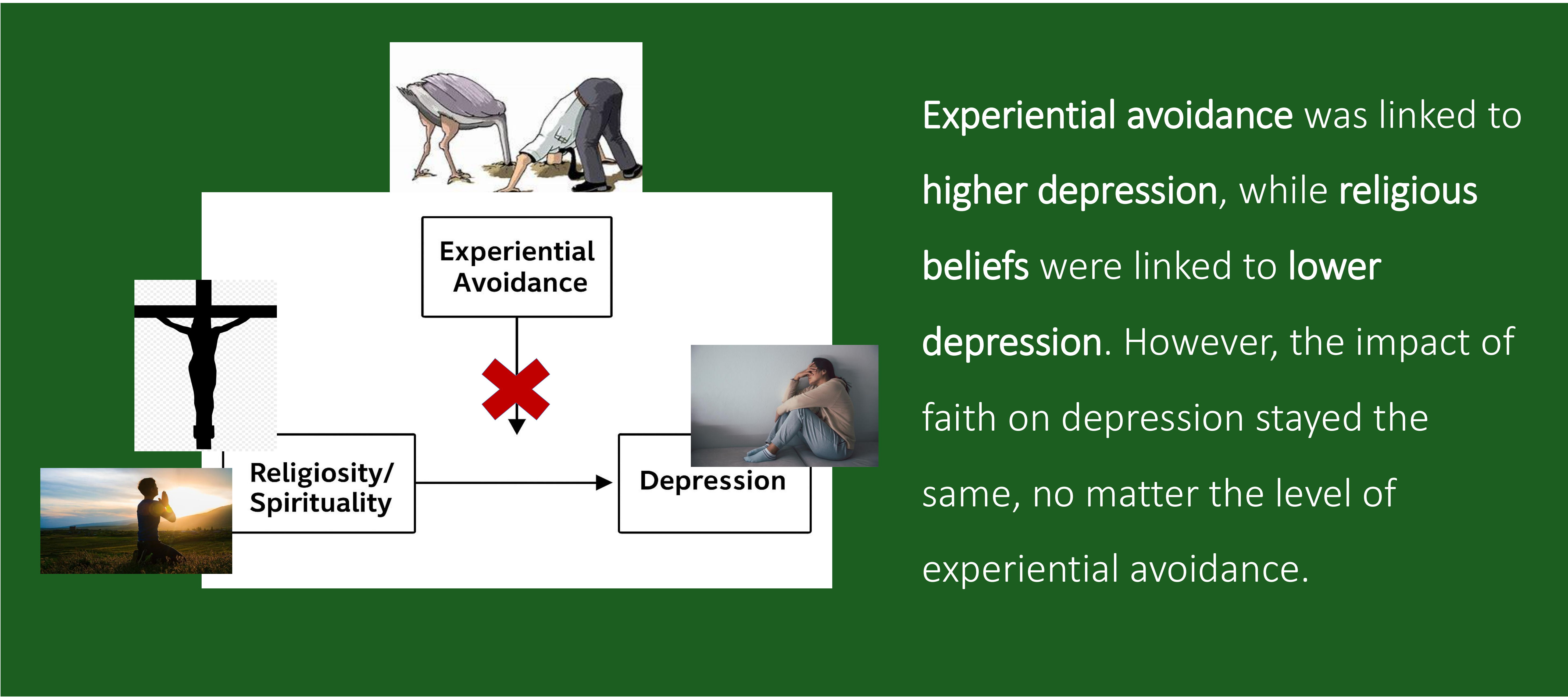
| Predictor                | $\beta$  |
|--------------------------|----------|
| Experiential Avoidance   | 0.460*** |
| Religiosity              | -0.080*  |
| Religious Fundamentalism | -0.065*  |
| Spirituality             | -0.018   |

\*Note: Betas from a multiple regression model excluding interaction terms. Interaction effects between EA and both religiosity and religious fundamentalism were tested using PROCESS Model 1 but were not statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ). Therefore, only the main effects are reported. \*Significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

- Higher EA significantly predicted increased depression ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ )
- Religiosity and religious fundamentalism predicted lower depression, both before and after controlling for EA ( $\beta = -0.08$  and  $-0.065$ , respectively)
- Spirituality did *not* significantly predict depression ( $\beta = -0.018$ ,  $p = .586$ )
- EA did *not* moderate the relationship between religiosity or religious fundamentalism and depression (religiosity × EA:  $B = 0.0002$ ,  $p = .992$ ; religious fundamentalism × EA:  $B = -0.0039$ ,  $p = .235$ )
- $R^2$  for the full model was .23, indicating that 23% of the variance in depression was explained by the predictors

## DISCUSSION

- Belief systems and experiential avoidance each uniquely influence depression
- Although Dworsky et al. (2016) found that experiential avoidance intensifies the negative impact of spiritual struggles, particularly when the avoidance targets spiritual distress (e.g., divine anger, shame, doubt)—our findings did not support a significant interaction. As a result, it remains unclear whether experiential avoidance alters the relationship between R/S and depression.
- Religiosity often includes structured practices, while spirituality is more personal and harder to quantify, which may explain its weaker association with depression.



Experiential avoidance was linked to higher depression, while religious beliefs were linked to lower depression. However, the impact of faith on depression stayed the same, no matter the level of experiential avoidance.

### Implications:

- Faith-based support can be effective even when EA is present
- Enhancing psychological flexibility (via ACT) may boost intervention outcomes

### Limitations:

- Cross-sectional design, university-based sample may not generalize broadly, broad spirituality measure

### Future Directions:

- Examine other moderators (religious guilt, cognitive rigidity, spiritual struggles) to explain when R/S offers less protection
- Incorporate qualitative methods to capture the complex and personal ways individuals experience and interpret their faith in the context of psychological distress



Scan for reference list and additional information

