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Empirical Research

## Suppressing spiritual struggles: The role of experiential avoidance in mental health<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

We examined the relation between experiential avoidance and mental health in a sample of 307 American adults reporting spiritual struggles. Experiential avoidance was consistently related to poorer mental health. Specifically, both general and spiritual struggle-specific avoidance were correlated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, and emotion regulation difficulties. Moreover, experiential avoidance tended to exacerbate the relation between spiritual struggles and adverse symptoms. The association between struggles and poorer mental health was stronger in people with higher levels of experiential avoidance. These findings were particularly robust for the measure of struggle-specific experiential avoidance. Finally, we discuss the importance of attending to the spiritual domain in experiential avoidance and outline future directions for clinical research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

Spirituality has been frequently tied to indices of health and well-being (e.g. Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). However, spirituality can also be a source of problems. Pargament (2007) has written that while people strive toward any number of values or sources of significance, “for many people the sacred is the focal point of their striving, the object of significance that lends order and coherence to all other goals” (p. 55). It follows that *spiritual struggles* – conflicts, questions, and tensions about spiritual and religious issues (Exline & Rose, 2005, pp. 315–330; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005) – may be especially problematic because they may shake or shatter individuals’ fundamental beliefs and values. Such struggles can take on different forms: divine, interpersonal, moral, doubt, ultimate meaning, and demonic (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Yet, they share a common focus on tensions within the spiritual realm, forming a higher-order factor (Stauner et al., 2016). Past research has shown that spiritual struggles are robustly tied to distress and ill health (e.g., Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Exline, 2013).

Spiritual struggles are not uncommon. For example, 65% of an American adult community sample reported experiencing some form of religious conflict in their lives (Nielson, 1998), and 62% of a national sample reported that they were sometimes angry at God (Exline, 2011). In another national sample, 23.2% reported that they felt God may be

punishing them and 12% wondered whether God had abandoned them (Fetzer Institute, 1999). Interestingly, spiritual struggles are not limited to those who regard themselves as religious or spiritual. In fact, in a national sample, those who indicated no religious affiliation reported more anger toward God than affiliates (Exline, 2011). Some atheists have also shown signs of spiritual struggle as manifested by emotional arousal when asked to dare God to harm themselves or those they are close to (Lindeman, Heywood, Riecki, & Makkonen, 2014).

The negative mental and physical health correlates of spiritual struggles have been documented in numerous studies using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. Regardless of their specific form, those struggling with spiritual matters are more likely to report higher levels of depression, anxiety (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005), and somatization (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006). Spiritual struggles are also associated with poorer physical health (e.g., Ai, Park, Huang, Rodgers, & Tice, 2007; Sherman, Simonton, Latif, Spohn, & Tricot, 2005; Zwingmann, Wirtz, Müller, Körber, & Murken, 2006), declines in physical functioning (Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco, & Nicholas, 1999), and increased mortality rates (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). These links appear consistently across diverse religious groups (e.g., Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, Pargament, & Midlarsky, 2011; Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Stein, 2008; Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003).

Despite growing awareness of the potential impact of spiritual

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struggles, few studies have examined factors that may help or hinder people facing spiritual struggles (Desai & Pargament, 2013). One potentially important predictor of the relation between mental health and spiritual struggles grows out of the model for human experience and behavior described by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). According to ACT, *experiential avoidance* describes efforts to escape or avoid unwanted internal experience, even when efforts to do so are harmful or contrary to personal goals (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Avoidance is not a problem, per se; rather, it is problematic when avoiding one's own unwanted internal experience becomes a rigid pattern of experiencing and responding to the world. This kind of avoidance can make it difficult to identify, work toward, or experience the qualities that lend a sense of purpose to life.

Experiential avoidance (EA) has been related to a variety of adverse symptoms. In a review by Ruiz (2010), EA was associated with increases in self-rated depression in 20 studies, and a similar link emerged between EA and increased symptoms of anxiety in 14 studies. In the area of chronic pain, longitudinal and mediational studies have demonstrated the influence of EA, or its inverse (acceptance), on symptoms of depression and anxiety (McCracken & Vowles, 2008; Vowles, McCracken, & Eccleston, 2008), functional status and functional disability (Esteve, Ramírez-Maestre, & López-Martínez, 2007; McCracken & Vowles, 2008), and psychological and physical well-being (Wicksell, Renöfält, Olsson, Bond, & Melin, 2008). Similarly, experimental studies of EA demonstrate that avoidance is related to poorer outcomes. For example, individuals with higher EA exhibited greater distress, discomfort, and sympathetic arousal when viewing unpleasant films (Salters-Pedneault, Gentes, & Roemer, 2007; Sloan, 2004). Additionally, in experimental comparisons of the effects of avoidance (e.g., suppression) versus acceptance instructions, avoidance elicited more distress (Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown, & Hofmann, 2006) and poorer levels of functioning (Marcks & Woods, 2007). In summary, experiential avoidance has been related to distress and poorer functioning in a variety of naturally occurring and experimentally manipulated contexts.

Experiential avoidance has not been examined in the context of spiritual struggles. However, EA should be relevant to spiritual struggles. Not only can spiritual struggles be a source of profound pain, confusion, and stigma, but people often see certain struggles, such as anger toward God, as morally wrong (Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs, 2012). Thus strugglers may be tempted to avoid the thoughts, feelings, and contexts associated with spiritual struggle. In this vein, Exline (2011) found that many adults were uncomfortable admitting their divine struggles to others, including friends and members of their religious group, and among those who disclosed, half reported receiving unsupportive reactions that led to feelings of guilt, judgment, and shame. Unfortunately, efforts to avoid spiritual struggle may also be met with negative results. Consistent with this, a study by Krause and Ellison (2009) suggests that EA may be problematic for those experiencing at least one form of spiritual struggle, religious doubting. In their study of a national sample of older adults over a six-year period, participants who attempted to suppress their experiences of religious doubt also tended to report less favorable health over time.

## 2. The present study

This study is the first to examine the role of experiential avoidance in coping with a full range of spiritual struggles, connecting a key construct of ACT with spirituality. Using a cross-sectional design, we examined the implications of experiential avoidance for mental health in a sample of spiritual strugglers. A secondary goal of this study was to address the question of whether experiential avoidance moderates the impact of spiritual struggles on mental health. More specifically, we tested the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Experiential avoidance, as measured generally and

specific to spiritual struggles, will be negatively associated with indices of psychological, physical, and spiritual mental health.

**Hypothesis 2.** The relationship between spiritual struggles and poorer psychological, physical, and spiritual mental health will be stronger among those with higher levels of experiential avoidance than among those lower in experiential avoidance.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) worker database. Previous social science research has shown that MTurk samples are comparable to other adult samples and that results from this source are psychometrically sound (e.g., Buhrmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). However, it is important to note that Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2011) found that 42% of MTurk workers reported no religious affiliation.

Out of a larger pool of 593 MTurk workers who responded to questions about how they were dealing with recent life experiences, a total of 307 met both criteria for inclusion in this study: (a) they endorsed a spiritual struggle item on the Recent Life Experience Survey, and (b) they endorsed at least two items with a 2 (a little bit) or greater from the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale. All participants were debriefed and received \$2.00 upon study completion.

As presented in Table 1, the majority of participants were male (58.6%), White (67.4%), married or partnered (41.0%), Christian (39.8%), and had at least some college education (87.9%). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 70 years, with the majority (73.3%) between 21 and 39 years. Consistent with Berinsky et al. (2011), overall levels of religiosity were modest in this sample of MTurk workers (again, see Table 1) and substantially lower than that of reported national averages (Gallup, 2012). Specifically, 23.8% identified as agnostic or atheist, and 17.6% identified as “none.”

## 4. Measures

### 4.1. Screening

The Recent Experiences Survey consists of 16 positive, negative, and neutral items, as well as one “write-in” option, capturing the nature of participants' experiences in the past 2–3 months. Individuals who endorsed any of the 7 spiritual struggle items were presented with all measures detailed below. Responses were summed to create an index score for each measure. Descriptive statistics are reported in the results.

### 4.2. Demographic and background information

Participants provided information regarding their demographics, religious affiliation, and religious practices. They also responded to an open-ended question about their spiritual struggle: “In a paragraph or two, please describe the struggle you're having related to your religion or spirituality” (Dworsky et al., 2013). This task gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their spiritual struggle prior to completing other measures.

### 4.3. Spiritual struggles (RSS)

The Religious and Spiritual Struggles (RSS) scale (Exline et al., 2014) consists of 26 items that assess different types of spiritual struggle. This measure uses a five-point scale, from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Examples of items include “I felt as though God had abandoned me” and “I felt as though my life had no deeper meaning.” Data from a large university sample supported the predictive, con-

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