The WAGER, Vol. 18(1) – Disorder or distraction? Experiential Avoidance and problem gambling behaviors

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Experiential
avoidance (EA) refers to an individual's attempt to avoid internal experiences related
to an event, such as thoughts,
feelings, and physical sensations, by engaging in some other activity (Riley 2012). Researchers have suggested that people can engage in EA through a number
of activities, including sex, drug use, exercise, and gambling (Riley 2012). EA might therefore be related to the development of gambling problems. This week's WAGER reviews a study that explored the relationship between EA and
problem gambling, as well as the relationships between these constructs and related constructs: thought suppression and mindfulness (Riley 2012).

Methods

A
convenience sample of 103 treatment-seeking problem gamblers from an outpatient
facility in South Australia
completed a battery of measures to assess their levels of problem gambling and mindfulness, their tendency to suppress difficult thoughts, and their inability to take action when faced with "negatively evaluated private events." Participants completed the following measures:

- Dispositional
  EA: Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II; Bond et al. 2011)[1]
    - In this scale, higher scores indicate *lower* levels of EA.
- Dispositional

thought suppression: White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI; Wegner and Zanakos
1994)[2]

- Dispositional
mindfulness: Mindfulness and Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown and Ryan
2003)[3]
- Problem
gambling symptomology: Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; Ferris and Wynne
2001)[4]

The
researchers completed multiple regression analyses to explore the relationships among problem gambling, thought suppression, and mindfulness; and, to examine whether EA mediated a relationship between thought suppression and problem gambling.

Results

Table 1 below shows the relationship (zero order
correlations) between the variables in question. Thought suppression and experiential
avoidance were positively associated with problem gambling
(r's = .33 and -.43; both p's < .01). Mindfulness, on the other
hand, was negatively associated with problem gambling (-.39; $p < .001$).

Table 1:
Zero order correlations of study variables. (This table is adapted from the original article).

	Experiential avoidance	Problem gambling	Mindfulness	Thought suppression
Experiential avoidance	–	-.43; $p < .001$	.51; $p < .001$	-.63; $p < .001$
Problem gambling	–	–	-.39; $p < .001$	.33; $p < .01$
Mindfulness	–	–	–	.48; $p < .001$

Thought suppression	–	–	–	–

The researchers conducted linear regression analyses to examine potential mediating relationships. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, EA appears to mediate the relationships between both thought suppression and mindfulness with problem gambling. When controlling for EA, the standardized regression coefficients between the other variable (mindfulness or thought suppression) and problem gambling decreased and became non-significant.

Table 2:
Linear Regression with Problem Gambling as the dependent variable w/ thought suppression and experiential avoidance as independent variables

	B	Standardized *B*	*p*	Sobel *z*;
Thought supression	0.04	0.11	0.91	2.73; $p < .001$
Experiential avoidance	-0.15	-0.35	0.22	

Table 3: Linear Regression with Problem Gambling as the dependent variable w/ mindfulness
and experiential avoidance as independent variables

	B	Standardized *B*	*p*	Sobel *z*
Mindfulness	-0.82	-0.19	.085	-2.82; $p < .001$
Experiential avoidance	-0.15	-0.35	.001	

Limitations

- The study may not be generalizable to other populations.
    - 103 is a relatively small sample size and all individuals came from the
      same outpatient facility in South Australia
    - The researchers used a convenience
      sample so the results may not be applicable to all problem gamblers
        - The participants were *treatment seeking* problem gamblers, perhaps those individuals for whom EA functions differently

would not be seeking treatment.

- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the analysis it is not possible to determine causal relationships between EA, thought suppression, and mindfulness and problem gambling.

Discussion

This article suggests that pathological gambling is related to experiential avoidance and thought suppression. The mediational findings suggest a model whereby people experience intrusive thoughts and attempt to cope with the distress these thoughts cause by gambling. A more mindful state, however, might decrease the urge to escape distress and gamble. These models can be applied to more targeted, and therefore more effective, gambling treatments. Specifically, incorporating mindfulness-based therapies and acceptance practices into gambling recovery might help counteract experiential avoidance and draw into focus the underlying problem that is leading to the problematic behavior.

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What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

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[1] A 10-item
self-report measuring “an individual’s tendency to make negative evaluations of unwanted private events, unwillingness to be in contact with them and a desire to alter their form or frequency to the extent that they are unable to take action in the face of such events.”

[2] A 15-item
self-report measuring “an individual’s tendency to suppress unwanted negative thoughts.”

[3] A
15-item self-report measuring “an individual’s
dispositional mindfulness” (i.e., the
existence or absence of an individual’s “attentional presence” to an experience)

[4] A 9 item self-report measure of problem gambling. 4 items that
assess problem gambling behaviors and 5items
that assess consequences of gambling.