

Using the Approach Avoid Task: Testing the Relation Between Implicit and Explicit Experiential Avoidance and Social Anxiety Symptoms

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Social anxiety disorder, or SAD, is a prevalent and debilitating disorder that affects a large percentage of the population over the course of the lifetime.¹ Experiential avoidance, or EA, has been identified as one potential mechanism driving SAD.² EA is an emotion regulation strategy characterized by internal resistance to and avoidance of thoughts and emotions.³ Importantly, EA is implicated as a transdiagnostic maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, robustly linked to severe mental health problems. While research suggests that EA might play a key role in SAD symptoms,^{2,4,5} there are meaningful limitations to this work. First, past studies testing EA reduction in SAD treatment have not yet established that reduction in EA precedes and predicts reduction in SAD symptoms. Establishing this temporal sequence has critical public health relevance, because it will help identify whether EA is a key mechanism in SAD. Given the resources directed toward changing EA across evidence-supported treatments, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy⁶ and Dialectical Behavior Therapy,⁷ establishing this temporal course and the specific role of EA is critical. Second, past studies have relied almost exclusively on explicit measures of EA, despite the limitations of explicit introspection⁸ and the unique predictive validity offered by implicit measurement.^{9,10} **To overcome these limitations of past work, the aim of the present study is to test whether reductions in implicit and explicit EA temporally precede and predict reductions in trait SAD symptoms, a key step in determining causality. To test this aim, a novel implicit measure of EA and a novel training task to reduce EA will be used, with the secondary goal that both the training and the implicit measure could be applied transdiagnostically in future research.** The study will use a within-subjects, repeated measures design that will incorporate a cognitive bias modification training and psychoeducation to reduce implicit and explicit EA. Implicit EA will be measured over the course of the study using two implicit tasks. It is hypothesized that there will be reductions in implicit and explicit EA over the course of the training, and implicit and explicit EA reductions will directly precede and predict trait SAD symptom reduction, which will help empirically establish EA as a causal mechanism of SAD. Funding from the ABCT Graduate Student Research Grant will provide me with the necessary resources to compensate participants.

Keywords: experiential avoidance; social anxiety disorder; implicit measurement; Implicit Associations Test; Approach Avoid Task