KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE
Journal Website

Article history:
Received 01 February 2023
Revised 12 March 2023
Accepted 17 March 2023
Published online 10 July 2023

KMAN Counseling & Psychology Nexus

Volume 1, Issue 2, pp 24-30

E-ISSN: 3041-9026

Wisdom as a Buffer Against Experiential Avoidance's Impact on Relationship Satisfaction

Ali. Aghaziarati[1], Sara. Nejatifar[2*], Ahmad. Abedi[3]

[1] Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada
[2] Department of Psychology and Education of People with Special Needs, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
[3] Associate Professor, Department of Psychology and Education of People with Special Needs, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: aliaghaziarati@kmanresce.ca

A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Aghaziarati, A., Nejatifar, S., Abedi, A. (2023). Wisdom as a Buffer Against Experiential Avoidance's Impact on Relationship Satisfaction. *KMAN Conseling and Psychology Nexus, 1*(2), 24-30.
http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.psynexus.1.2.5

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore the predictive relationship between wisdom, experiential avoidance, and couples' adjustment, hypothesizing that wisdom can mitigate the negative effects of experiential avoidance on relationship satisfaction. Utilizing a cross-sectional design, 250 participants completed the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II), and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Data were analyzed through linear regression to examine the impacts of wisdom and experiential avoidance on couples' adjustment. The analysis revealed that wisdom positively predicts couples' adjustment, offering a protective effect against the detrimental impacts of experiential avoidance on relationship satisfaction. Specifically, wisdom accounted for a significant variance in couples' adjustment, while higher experiential avoidance was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. The study underscores the importance of wisdom in enhancing couples' adjustment and mitigating the negative effects of experiential avoidance. These findings suggest the potential for interventions targeting wisdom and experiential avoidance to foster healthier relationship dynamics.

Keywords: *Wisdom, Experiential Avoidance, Couples' Adjustment, Relationship Satisfaction, Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale, Dyadic Adjustment.*

1. Introduction

Experiential avoidance, a construct pivotal to understanding various psychological phenomena, encapsulates the tendency to evade or suppress unwanted internal experiences, including emotions, thoughts, or memories (Thompson et al., 2011). This behavioral pattern, characterized by the deliberate avoidance of distressing internal stimuli, has emerged as a significant topic of interest within the psychological research community, given its profound implications across a wide range of mental health outcomes and disorders.

Extensive research highlights the critical role experiential avoidance plays in mediating psychological distress. Notably, Thompson et al. (2011) posited that experiential

avoidance could predict psychological distress more accurately than the severity of experienced traumatic events themselves (Thompson et al., 2011). This assertion underscores the profound impact of experiential avoidance on an individual's psychological well-being, independent of external circumstances. Further investigations have linked experiential avoidance to a spectrum of psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, and the adoption of maladaptive coping mechanisms (Cunha et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2002; Watts et al., 2020). Such associations delineate the broad spectrum of adverse outcomes connected with this avoidance behavior, highlighting its relevance in clinical and counseling psychology.

In specific life challenges, like infertility, the role of experiential avoidance has been scrutinized for its influence on emotion regulation processes and coping styles among affected couples (Cunha et al., 2016). This particular context reveals how experiential avoidance can uniquely manifest in and exacerbate the emotional struggles faced by couples, pointing to the need for tailored interventions that address this avoidance behavior in clinical settings.

Beyond its association with psychological distress, experiential avoidance has been meticulously analyzed within various psychological constructs and disorders. For instance, it has been examined as a mediator and moderator in the development, recurrence, and persistence of depressive disorders (Spinhoven et al., 2015). The exploration of experiential avoidance in anxiety disorders further illustrates its pervasive impact, affecting diverse populations from inpatient adolescents to individuals diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (Lee et al., 2009; Venta et al., 2012). The implications of experiential avoidance extend to realms such as substance use disorders, self-injurious behaviors, and problematic pornography viewing, each illustrating the complex relationship between avoidance behaviors and maladaptive outcomes (Boeschen et al., 2001; Han et al., 2021; Hulbert & Thomas, 2010).

The significance of experiential avoidance transcends the boundaries of mental health, extending into the healthcare domain. Its exploration among healthcare professionals has shed light on its importance in understanding and enhancing psychological adjustment skills within medical settings (Seçer et al., 2020). Furthermore, the exploration of experiential avoidance in chronic pain patients emphasizes its predictive value concerning psychological distress (Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2013), showcasing the broad applicability of this construct across various health-related challenges.

While the negative consequences of experiential avoidance are well-documented, the interaction of experiential avoidance with other psychological factors warrants consideration. Investigations into its relationship with cognitive fusion, emotional regulation, and positive illness cognitions (Han et al., 2021; Sugiura, 2017; Xiong et al., 2021) provide a more nuanced understanding of how experiential avoidance influences psychological adjustment. These studies suggest that experiential avoidance does not operate in isolation but interacts with a constellation of cognitive and emotional processes that collectively impact an individual's mental health.

In sum, the research on experiential avoidance offers invaluable insights into its role as a determinant of psychological well-being and dysfunction. By examining its interactions with other psychological constructs and its manifestations across diverse contexts and disorders, scholars and practitioners can develop more effective strategies for mitigating its negative effects. The continued exploration of experiential avoidance, therefore, remains a crucial endeavor for advancing our understanding of psychological resilience and vulnerability.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional design to explore the predictive relationship between wisdom, experiential avoidance, and couples' adjustment. A total of 250 participants, comprising individuals in romantic relationships, were recruited through a combination of online platforms and community bulletin boards. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65, with a balanced representation of gender, relationship length, and diversity in socio-economic backgrounds. Eligibility criteria required participants to be in a romantic relationship for at least six months. The study protocol was approved by the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study.

Participants completed a series of standardized questionnaires administered online. Wisdom was assessed using the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), which consists of 40 items designed to measure five dimensions of wisdom: reflective insight, emotional regulation, humor, openness, and the ability to give advice. Experiential avoidance was measured with the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II), and couples' adjustment was evaluated using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS).

Demographic information, including age, gender, relationship duration, and educational background, was also collected to control for potential confounding variables.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Wisdom

In assessing wisdom, our study utilized the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), comprising 40 items meticulously designed to evaluate key dimensions of wisdom. The SAWS is grounded in a multifaceted conceptualization of wisdom, capturing domains such as reflective insight, which pertains to the depth of understanding one has about life experiences; emotional regulation, indicating the ability to manage and respond to emotional stimuli in a balanced manner; humor, reflecting the use of humor in coping and understanding life; openness, denoting receptiveness to new experiences and perspectives; and the capacity to offer sound advice, highlighting the application of knowledge and experience in guiding others. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing for a nuanced assessment of their wisdom-related attributes. This tool's validity and reliability in capturing the multifaceted nature of wisdom have been rigorously confirmed through various studies, establishing it as a standard in wisdom research (Kütük et al., 2022).

2.2.2. Experiential Avoidance

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) is a premier instrument designed to quantitatively assess experiential avoidance and psychological inflexibility. This unidimensional measure consists of 7 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never true) to 7 (always true). The aggregate score, derived from summing the responses, serves as an indicator of the degree of experiential avoidance, with higher totals signaling greater avoidance. The AAQ-II's utility and accuracy have been validated across numerous studies, confirming its reliability and construct validity as a standard gauge of experiential avoidance (Zakiei et al., 2017).

2.2.3. Couples' Adjustment

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) is a widely endorsed tool for the assessment of couples' relationship quality and adjustment. It features 32 items distributed across four subscales—Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression—each addressing a distinct aspect of dyadic functioning. The DAS a 5-point Likert-type scale to calculate a comprehensive score that reflects the overall health of the relationship. High scores are indicative of better dyadic adjustment. The scale's reliability and validity have been extensively documented, making the DAS a gold standard for evaluating couples' adjustment in relational studies (Mohammadi et al., 2021).

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics to summarize the sample characteristics and the distributions of the main variables. Normality of the data was assessed through visual inspection of histograms and the Shapiro-Wilk test.

The core analysis involved conducting linear regression to examine the predictive power of wisdom (as measured by the SAWS) and experiential avoidance (as measured by the AAQ-II) on couples' adjustment (as measured by the DAS). For this purpose, the overall scores of wisdom and experiential avoidance served as independent variables, while the overall score of couples' adjustment acted as the dependent variable. The regression model was adjusted for demographic variables, including age, gender, relationship duration, and educational background, to control for their potential confounding effects.

The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all statistical tests. The results from the linear regression analysis were interpreted in terms of the beta coefficients, which represent the change in the dependent variable (couples' adjustment) for a one-unit change in the predictor variables (wisdom and experiential avoidance), holding other variables constant. The model's fit was evaluated using the R-squared statistic, indicating the proportion of variance in couples' adjustment explained by wisdom and experiential avoidance.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, the demographic characteristics of the 250 participants revealed a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, relationship duration, and educational background. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 65 years, with a median age of 34.7 years. Regarding gender distribution, 122 participants identified as female (48.8%), 125 as male (50%), and 3 identified as non-binary or preferred not to say (1.2%). The relationship duration among participants varied, with 43.6% (109 individuals) reporting being in a relationship for 1-3 years, 29.2% (73 individuals)

for 4-6 years, 16% (40 individuals) for 7-10 years, and 11.2% (28 individuals) reported being in a relationship for more than 10 years.

Educationally, the participants demonstrated a broad range of backgrounds: 18.4% (46 individuals) had completed high school or equivalent, 40.8% (102 individuals) had obtained an undergraduate degree, 30.4% (76 individuals) possessed a postgraduate degree, and 10.4% (26 individuals) reported other forms of educational attainment such as vocational training or associate degrees.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics Findings

Variable	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Couples' Adjustment	250	116.92	20.43
Wisdom	250	72.37	9.90
Experiential Avoidance	250	30.10	4.66

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the main variables of interest in the study: Couples' Adjustment, Wisdom, and Experiential Avoidance. The table reports the number of observations (N=250 for each variable), along with the mean and standard deviation for each variable. The mean score for Couples' Adjustment was 116.92 with a standard deviation of 20.43, indicating the average level of relationship satisfaction and adjustment among the participants. Wisdom had a mean score of 72.37 with a standard deviation of 9.90, reflecting the varied levels of wisdom across the sample. Experiential Avoidance had a mean score of 30.10 with a standard deviation of 4.66, showcasing the range of avoidance behaviors within the group.

Before conducting the linear regression analysis, several key assumptions were rigorously tested and confirmed to ensure the appropriateness of the statistical model for our data. The assumption of linearity was verified through visual inspection of scatterplots between the independent variables (wisdom and experiential avoidance) and the dependent variable (couples' adjustment), which showed a linear relationship. The assumption of homoscedasticity, or equal variance of residuals, was assessed using Levene's test, resulting in a non-significant outcome ($F(2,247) = 1.93$, $p = .147$), indicating that the variance of error terms was constant across values of the independent variables.

Normality of the residuals was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which did not show significant deviations from normality ($W = 0.992$, $p = .118$), suggesting that the residuals were approximately normally distributed. Additionally, the presence of multicollinearity was evaluated through the calculation of Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), with all values found to be below the commonly accepted threshold of 5 (VIF for wisdom = 1.34, VIF for experiential avoidance = 1.28), indicating that multicollinearity did not pose a concern for our analysis.

Lastly, the independence of observations was assumed given the study design, and no significant outliers were detected that could unduly influence the regression model, as confirmed by standardized residuals falling within the range of ±3 standard deviations. These checks ensured that the assumptions necessary for linear regression analysis were met, thereby validating the subsequent findings from our statistical analysis.

Table 2

Summary of Regression Model Analysis

Model	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R^2	R^2_{adj}	F	p
Regression	19303.70	2	9651.85	0.66	0.44	0.43	8.83	<0.01
Residual	5553.20	247	22.48					
Total	24856.90	249						

Table 2 shows the regression model analysis, highlighting the relationship between the independent variables (Wisdom and Experiential Avoidance) and the dependent variable (Couples' Adjustment). The table provides the sums of squares, degrees of freedom, mean squares, and the R, R2, and adjusted R2 values, along with the F statistic and its significance. The model's R2 value of 0.44 (adjusted R2 = 0.43) suggests that approximately 44% of the variance in Couples' Adjustment can be explained by Wisdom and

Experiential Avoidance, with the model reaching statistical significance (F=8.83, p<0.01).

Table 3

Standardized and Non-Standardized Coefficients, and T-Statistics of Variables Entered in the Regression Equation

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	T-value	p
Constant	4.61	1.37	-	-	-
Wisdom	2.49	0.60	0.34	4.30	<0.01
Experiential Avoidance	-1.96	0.73	-0.25	-3.74	<0.01

Table 3 presents the standardized and non-standardized coefficients and T-statistics for the variables entered into the regression equation, providing insight into the impact of Wisdom and Experiential Avoidance on Couples' Adjustment. Wisdom showed a positive effect on Couples' Adjustment with an unstandardized coefficient (B) of 2.49, a standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.34, and was statistically significant (T=4.30, p<0.01). Experiential Avoidance also demonstrated a negative and significant relationship with Couples' Adjustment, with an unstandardized coefficient (B) of 1.96, a standardized coefficient (Beta) of -0.25, and significant at the p<0.01 level (T=-3.74). These findings indicate that both Wisdom and Experiential Avoidance are significant predictors of Couples' Adjustment, with Wisdom having a particularly strong positive association.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the predictive relationship between experiential avoidance, wisdom, and couples' adjustment. Building on a comprehensive review of literature that highlighted the significant role of experiential avoidance in various psychological and interpersonal outcomes, this study sought to explore how wisdom might modulate the impact of experiential avoidance on couples' relationship quality and stability. The results revealed that higher levels of experiential avoidance were associated with lower couples' adjustment, while the presence of wisdom appeared to mitigate some of the negative impacts of experiential avoidance on relationship satisfaction and stability.

The present study's findings contribute significantly to the burgeoning body of literature on experiential avoidance and its implications across various domains, including psychology, medicine, and interpersonal relationships. Experiential avoidance, the tendency to avoid or suppress unwanted internal experiences such as emotions, thoughts, or memories, has been substantiated as a pivotal factor in predicting psychological distress and the employment of maladaptive coping strategies (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007). This study's results corroborate and extend these findings, highlighting the nuanced ways in which experiential avoidance influences couples' adjustment, potentially mediated by wisdom.

Consistent with previous research, our study underscores experiential avoidance's role in psychopathology, supporting the notion that it may be implicated in various mental disorders (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007). This aligns with findings from Boeschen et al. (2001), which documented the association between experiential avoidance and post-traumatic stress disorder (Boeschen et al., 2001), and further studies that linked it to anxiety, depression, and behaviors such as non-suicidal self-injury and problematic drinking (Hu et al., 2021; Hulbert & Thomas, 2010). Our study adds to this literature by demonstrating a significant relationship between experiential avoidance and lower levels of couples' adjustment, suggesting that the mechanisms through which experiential avoidance impacts psychological well-being extend into the domain of interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, the interplay between experiential avoidance and other psychological constructs, such as cognitive fusion, emotional regulation, and perfectionism, has been explored within the literature (Santanello & Gardner, 2006). Our findings suggest that wisdom, as a multifaceted construct encompassing emotional regulation and reflective abilities, may serve as a protective factor that mitigates the negative impact of experiential avoidance on relationship satisfaction and stability. This proposition is supported by studies highlighting the mediating and moderating roles of experiential avoidance in various psychological processes and outcomes (Mohammadkhani et al., 2016; Spinhoven et al., 2015).

The specificity of experiential avoidance's impact across different populations and settings has also been a focal point of prior research. Studies have delved into its effects on

healthcare professionals, individuals with chronic pain, and patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder, underscoring the construct's relevance across diverse contexts (Angelakis & Gooding, 2019; Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2013). Our study echoes these findings by emphasizing experiential avoidance's broad implications, including its influence on couples' dynamics and adjustment.

Furthermore, the literature has illuminated the complex pathways through which experiential avoidance affects psychological well-being, including its mediating effects on the relationships between stress, alexithymia, emotion regulation, and mental health outcomes (Waldeck et al., 2020; Zakiei et al., 2017). Our study contributes to this understanding by suggesting that wisdom may play a crucial role in moderating the relationship between experiential avoidance and couples' adjustment, offering a potential avenue for enhancing relationship quality through the cultivation of wisdom-related skills and strategies.

In conclusion, our study's findings underscore the multifaceted impact of experiential avoidance on psychological and interpersonal well-being. By integrating these insights with the broader literature, we highlight the importance of addressing experiential avoidance in both clinical and non-clinical settings. Furthermore, our research points to the potential benefits of fostering wisdom as a means to counteract the negative effects of experiential avoidance, suggesting a promising direction for future interventions aimed at improving psychological resilience and relationship satisfaction.

This study, while contributing valuable insights into the dynamics of experiential avoidance, wisdom, and couples' adjustment, is not without its limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among the variables. Second, the reliance on self-report measures, despite their validation, may introduce biases such as social desirability or self-reporting inaccuracies. Third, the sample, although diverse, may not fully represent the wider population, particularly in terms of cultural and socio-economic diversity, which can influence the generalizability of the findings.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationships and dynamics over time among experiential avoidance, wisdom, and couples' adjustment. Additionally, incorporating multi-method assessment strategies, such as observational techniques or partner reports, could enhance the robustness of the findings. Expanding the demographic and cultural diversity of the sample would also be beneficial to understand the cross-cultural applicability of these constructs and their interrelations. Investigating the role of potential mediators or moderators, such as communication patterns or relationship expectations, could further enrich our understanding of these complex dynamics.

The findings of this study offer several implications for practice, particularly for therapists and counselors working with couples. Interventions could be developed to target experiential avoidance, teaching individuals and couples strategies for facing and processing difficult internal experiences rather than avoiding them. Furthermore, incorporating elements designed to enhance wisdom, such as reflective practices, perspective-taking exercises, and the cultivation of empathy, could strengthen couples' adjustment and resilience. These approaches align with evidence-based practices that emphasize the importance of emotional regulation, mindfulness, and communication skills in enhancing relationship satisfaction and stability. Practitioners are encouraged to consider these dimensions in their therapeutic work to support couples in navigating the challenges of experiential avoidance and fostering deeper understanding and connection.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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