

“It’s not avoiding anything”: Exploring avoidance in the context of non-suicidal self-injury

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ABSTRACT

Non-suicidal self-injury is a concerning and prevalent behavior, particularly among adolescents and university students. Most theoretical models focus on the role avoidance plays in self-injury but, there is no consensus on what is being avoided. The aim of this study was to gain insight from individuals with lived experience of self-injury to better understand the role of avoidance in NSSI. Thirty-five interviews were conducted with individuals with lived experience of NSSI (18 – 44 years) and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were developed to address our aim: active not passive; a short term distraction; externalizing inner turmoil. Our analysis suggests that avoidance is not a term that resonates with individuals with lived experience of NSSI. The theoretical and methodological implications of these findings are that we need to use language that resonates with individuals with lived experience and improve the way avoidance is conceptualized.

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Introduction

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is the intentional and purposeful damage an individual inflicts on their own body tissue, which is not associated with suicidal intent and excludes culturally sanctioned behaviors such as tattooing and body piercing (International Society for the Study of Self-injury, 2022). Self-injury is a pervasive behavior; within community samples, 17% of adolescents, 13% of young adults, and 5% of older adults report a history of NSSI (Swannell et al., 2014). Among in-patient populations, the prevalence of NSSI is elevated, with 40 – 80% of adolescents and 20% of adults reporting a history of NSSI (Briere & Gil, 1998; Darce, 1990; DiClemente et al., 1991; Nock & Prinstein, 2004). Notably, this behavior is particularly prevalent among university students, with one in five reporting a history of NSSI and many reporting the onset of NSSI in their first year of university (Kiekens et al., 2019; Muehlenkamp et al., 2019). While there are a number of reasons individuals cite for their engagement in NSSI, the most commonly endorsed is to regulate their emotions (Taylor et al., 2018).

Given the emotion regulatory function of NSSI, most models of NSSI focus on the experience and regulation of one’s emotions (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock, 2009; Nock & Prinstein, 2004; Selby & Joiner, 2009). Across these models, a number highlight the role of avoidance in NSSI (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock, 2009; Selby & Joiner, 2009); however, the terms used to describe avoidance as it relates to NSSI vary across these models. Some propose that the tendency to avoid unwanted emotional experiences heightens risk of NSSI (experiential avoidance, e.g., Chapman et al., 2006), some discuss avoidance of doing something unpleasant or avoidance of social situations (avoidance-

escape, e.g., Nock & Prinstein, 2004), others state NSSI can be used to avoid both situations or emotions (Hasking et al., 2017), and some talk about NSSI being a distraction from unpleasant emotional cascades (e.g., Selby & Joiner, 2009). Across these models, it is important to note that while some refer to the behavior as avoidance, others refer to it as distraction. It has also been suggested that NSSI itself may be a form of avoidance; specifically, engaging in NSSI could allow individuals to avoid distressing thoughts, emotional responses, and situations that may elicit these thoughts and/or emotions (Chapman et al., 2006). Furthermore, there are ambiguities relating to what is being avoided. If we consider measures that ask participants about their engagement in NSSI, they range from “avoiding the impulse to attempt suicide” on the Inventory of Statements about Self-Injury (ISAS; Klonsky & Olino, 2008) and “how much did you engage in NSSI to get out of doing something or to get away from others?” on the Self-Injurious Thoughts and Behaviors Interview (SITBI, Nock et al., 2007) to “to avoid people,” “to avoid school, work, or other activities,” and “to avoid punishment or paying the consequences” on the Functional Assessment of Self-Mutilation (FASM; Lloyd et al., 1997).

Although, from a theoretical standpoint, there appears to be a link between avoidance and NSSI, it is clear there is no consensus on specifically what is being avoided in the context of NSSI. Gaining a deeper understanding of how individuals with lived experience of NSSI understand, conceptualize, and/or experience avoidance could help inform our theoretical models of NSSI, as well as our understanding and measurement of avoidance. In the current study, we interviewed a sample of individuals with lived experience of NSSI, with the aim of better understanding the experience of avoidance and the potential role it plays in NSSI.

Materials and Method

Procedure

The study was approved by Curtin University’s Human Research Ethics Committee in 2020 (HREC2020-0624). After receiving ethical approval, flyers were posted around Curtin University’s campus. English speaking participants, over the age of 17 (if considered a mature minor), with a history of NSSI were asked to contact the first author if they were interested in taking part in a face to face/online interview. Eligible participants could have current or prior history of NSSI. All interviews were conducted between November 2020 and April 2021 either face-to-face or online, depending on the participant’s preference. Thirty interviews were conducted face-to-face (only one was conducted off-campus), and five interviews were conducted online. Participants were sent the information sheet prior to the interview and were asked to return the signed informed consent to the first author, prior to their interview. The first author conducted all the interviews (approximately 20–40 minutes each). All interviews were audio recorded using two devices to allow for accurate transcription. All participants were reimbursed with a \$20 gift voucher to thank them for their participation. Participants were also provided with a list of useful resources and a copy of the participant information sheet at the conclusion of the interview. After interviews were transcribed, they were returned, encrypted, to participants for their approval. No follow-up interviews were conducted.

Materials

A semi-structured interview guide was developed in accordance with our research aim and in collaboration with individuals with lived experience of NSSI. An initial interview guide was presented to our laboratory group who are researchers and students researching in the area of NSSI, and some have lived experience of NSSI. The questions were discussed and adapted to make them more relevant to people with lived experience of NSSI. Prior to the interview questions, information was collected regarding the demographic information of the participant, including gender, age, country of birth, and if the participant had a mental health diagnosis. The interview started with broader questions regarding the participants’ experiences of NSSI and then moved to more focused questions regarding avoidance, such as “Tell me about your experience of NSSI” and “Sometimes people talk about NSSI being used as a form of avoidance. What are your thoughts on that?” Additional prompts were included to further explore information provided by participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experience. The interview guide was piloted with a colleague (with lived experience of NSSI) of the first author prior to advertising for participants. After conducting two interviews, questions were amended to ask participants for demographic information, their motivation for taking part in the study, and to explicitly ask about the role distraction played in their engagement of NSSI. A question asking about distraction was included due to the interchangeability of avoidance and distraction within the literature (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock, 2009; Selby & Joiner, 2009) and the use of the word distraction by participants.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis approach (2022), using a critical realist/contextualism framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis was selected as we wanted to best represent the lived experience perspective of the role of avoidance in NSSI. As reflexive thematic analysis encourages a deep engagement with the data, and due to a constructionist/interpretivist approach guiding our analysis, we felt this was the preferred approach. Reflexive thematic analysis allows the identification of patterns and themes across a data set, and we felt this would best allow us to acknowledge our participants’ reality based in their own socio-cultural contexts and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Madill et al., 2000). It also allows for the acknowledgment and critical evaluation of the researchers’ impact on the interpretation of the data and how this may impact or influence the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within our analysis, we adopted an inductive and deductive approach to allow the experience of the participants to guide our findings. The inductive or “bottom-up” approach allowed us to identify patterns and themes within the data. Additionally, due to our specific interest in avoidance, there were aspects of our analysis that were deductive or “top-down” as we were specifically looking for instances or utterances of avoidance or descriptions of behavior that theoretically may align with the definitions of avoidance. To maintain confidentiality, non-gendered pronouns have been used throughout the document.

During the interviewing, transcription, and analysis phases, the first author maintained field notes and completed a reflexive journal after interviews. This ensured reflexivity and familiar-

ization with the data (Phase 1 of Braun and Clarke's [2022] guidelines). Familiarization continued during the transcription process. Nineteen interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author, and 16 were transcribed by three trained undergraduate students. Transcribed data were uploaded into NVivo (v1) software. The first author coded all data inductively at a surface (semantic) and underlying (latent) level (Phase 2) and developed initial themes (Phase 3). Themes were reviewed and refined through discussion with all authors (Phase 4 and 5) and resulted in the final analysis and report (Phase 6).

Researcher positionality

The first author is an outside researcher (an individual who does not have lived experience of NSSI) on the topic of NSSI, but has been active in research in this area for four years. They hold a degree in psychology, so this may influence the lens through which they view the data. However, they have utilized reflexive practice to reflect and challenge any assumptions they may bring to the participants' experiences. Where there were reactions, these have been discussed with the co-authors and/or the broader research group, some of whom are inside researchers (individuals with lived experience of NSSI) of this topic. The interview guide was developed in collaboration with inside researchers to ensure that questions were relevant and utilized appropriate language.

Participants

Thirty-five participants with a lived experience of NSSI (aged 18–44, $m = 22.51$, $mode = 20$, 25 female, eight male, one trans-male, and one non-binary) were interviewed. Most participants were born in Australia (63%) and reported a mental health difficulty/problem (69%). The most common diagnoses were comorbid anxiety and depression (67%), post-traumatic stress disorder (17%), and eating disorders (anorexia and/or bulimia, 12.5%).

Analysis

The analysis yielded three themes. Theme one *active not passive* explores how participants do not see engaging in NSSI as an avoidance of feelings, thoughts, or emotions, but rather as an active way of dealing with what they are experiencing. Within this theme, participants detailed their feeling of being in control, actively engaging with their experiences, and how NSSI can serve a pre-emptive function, preventing escalation of unwanted emotions. Theme 2, *a short term distraction*, explores the importance of semantics and language related to how participants describe their experience of engaging in NSSI and their awareness that NSSI is not a long-term solution. Finally, Theme 3, *externalizing inner turmoil*, has a dual meaning in that participants view their reasons for engaging in NSSI as more than just dealing with internal feelings (experiential avoidance); it also allows them to deal with external experiences. This theme also illustrates that engagement in NSSI allows internal experiences to become external (physical) representations of what they are dealing with internally. Data extracts are included to substantiate each theme. Extracts have been edited to improve readability by including punctuation and removing utterances such as um or er. Additionally, irrelevant details have been removed, such as interviewer comments, and extracts from the same participants at different time points have been joined. This is indicated by [] in the report.

Theme 1: Active not passive

Avoidance is often discussed as being “maladaptive,” not dealing with issues, or a passive or ineffective way of dealing with problems (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1999; Ottenbreit & Dobson, 2004). When explicitly asked about avoidance, participants often stated the opposite to be true, in that they were actively engaging and doing something to resolve or reduce the intensity of their experience. As P35 stated “When I’m engaging in the activity [NSSI], it’s more like I feel like I’m getting a sense of control because I’m choosing to partake in the activity [NSSI].” This sentiment was reiterated by P16 who referred to it as a time to engage with their emotions “time to deal with those emotions.” Likewise, P31 stated “it’s like a pause [] all you’re doing is focusing on the act itself, so that’s probably why it feels like a pause button.” This quote by P31 highlights the duality of engaging in NSSI. While participants do not see the act of engaging in NSSI as a form of avoidance, it does allow them space or distance from what they are experiencing. The experience of engaging in NSSI also allowed participants to actively deal with what they were experiencing such as overwhelming feelings or the chaos in their heads. These explanations align with current theoretical models, in that when experiences feel overwhelming or individuals have limited emotion regulation strategies, they are likely to engage in NSSI in order to avoid or distract from the internal experience (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock & Prinstein, 2004; Selby & Joiner, 2009).

An additional aspect to participants seeing engaging in NSSI as active was the pre-emptive function that NSSI served for some people. The Experiential Avoidance Model posits that a stimulus elicits an emotional response, which in turn prompts the individual to want to avoid these uncomfortable internal experiences (Chapman et al., 2006). However, a common experience among participants was engaging in NSSI *prior* to any stimulus. As P27 discussed “if I hadn’t done it in the morning then I wouldn’t be able to concentrate in classes.” Similarly, P25 discusses their need to engage in NSSI prior to their practicum placement: “For placement, I always did it in the morning before I start the day.” This was seen as the action of preparing themselves for anything that may arise during their day. Participant 14 discussed the parallels between how people started their days with coffee: “it is a way of coping with similar to like people would get up and start their day with coffee, I would get up and start my day by [self-injuring].” Collectively, this demonstrates how NSSI allows individuals to actively cope with their day rather than as an avoidance of emotions already elicited.

Theme 2: A short-term distraction

Participants discussed being aware that engaging in self-injury was not resolving the issues they were experiencing, but rather, that it provided them with a temporary moment of respite from what they were experiencing at that time. This aligns more closely with definition of distraction (defined as a lack of attention, North, 2011), in that they just need to not pay attention to what they are experiencing in the moment by focusing on something else. Participant 31 stated “It [NSSI] feels like a band-aid solution. It’s not a solution. Feels like a very quick fix.” Participant 30 substantiated “it doesn’t really help in a long-term, but it helps during that moment.”

Individuals are aware this is not a long-term solution, but it

dampens or reduces the experience long enough for them to be able to function for the rest of the day or facilitates sleep. Participant 11 elaborates

I know that I have done something about it, so I can go to sleep sort of thing and or just get on with my day []. Those feelings have been just put to the back of your mind, they are always there, and they come back.

Additionally, P24 stated “after I did it, I guess I would still obviously feel like shit, you know, I would probably still be crying and stuff, but it did kind of soothe those feelings.”

When explicitly asked about NSSI being used as a form of avoidance, as part of our deductive approach, most participants had a visceral reaction; some recoiled, grimaced, or looked confused. Participant 34 responded “I don’t really know what you are avoiding by hurting yourself. I don’t know what on earth you could be avoiding. You’re obviously in a bad place, trying to find any possible way that helps you to cope. [] It’s not avoiding anything.” This resistance to the word “avoidance” may come from the negative connotation associated with the word. “Avoidance” appears to be an emotive word associated with not dealing with issues/problems, procrastination, and not making decisions. However, future research is required in this area so that a deeper understanding of why individuals who engage in NSSI may have this reaction to the term “avoidance.”

While their descriptions of their reasons for engaging in NSSI and acknowledgment that it is a short-term fix that does not necessarily address the underlying issue do map on to our theoretical understanding of avoidance (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock & Prinstein, 2004; Selby & Joiner, 2009), it appeared that the word “avoidance” did not resonate with their reasons for engaging. This illustrates the importance of language and including the voice of lived experience in our research. People do not resonate with the word “avoidance.” Yet, when explicitly asked if they considered NSSI to be a distraction from what they were experiencing, most participants endorsed this as an accurate description of their behavior.

Theme 3: Externalizing inner turmoil

The theme of *externalizing inner turmoil* explores how NSSI is viewed as being used to externally represent the extent of an individual’s internal pain as well as to cope with external experiences. Participants discussed how NSSI allowed them to make internal pain visible through external means. Participants shared how internal experiences were not believed to be serious by significant others in their lives, whereas external or visible pain or injuries were. Participant 22 substantiates, “I was like turning emotional pain into something physical.” Similarly, P8 stated, “I still struggle to deal with the mental pain or psychological pain of shame or hurt and the physical pain. It’s just such an easy way to [] let that out.” Likewise, P14 discussed, “that manifestation of it into physical form is almost like it’s flowing away, not that the emotion is going, but you’re able to release the emotion in a physical form.”

External events, and their associated emotional response, that can lead to individuals engaging in NSSI include interpersonal issues such as conflict with friends or romantic partners. Our analysis captured how participants engaged in NSSI to avoid relationships ending, as P28 discussed:

I was in a relationship at the time, and I didn’t want him to leave me, so I threatened to do it [self-injure], or do

it [self-injure] and then they feel really bad and be like “Oh, like I’ll help you through this or whatever,” and I felt cared about.

Additional external situations such as attending school or interpersonal conflict with peers was detail by participants. Participant 7 elaborates “being sad like about like social things, like school and not feeling like I fit in and having issues with friends.” This quote highlights the interconnectivity between the feeling and the situation. The participant identifies how the situation (the external) is eliciting the feeling of being sad (the external), while P1 discussed the internal experience, “angry, sad distressed, not feeling worthwhile. Like just wanting someone to care.”

Conversely, rather than avoiding feelings, our analysis showed how NSSI allowed engagement with the feelings when feeling numb. P14 elaborated:

There’s been experiences where just wanting to feel something. I was on a lot of meds that were making me feel really numb, [] couldn’t cry, couldn’t do anything, and I just wanted to feel something. I wanted to feel like I was still somewhat in touch with some sort of feeling ‘cause everything was just numb.

This also highlights that there is an incongruence between the way individuals conceptualize their reasons for engaging in NSSI and the way we theorize mechanisms underlying NSSI. Participants often reported the external event as the reason for their engagement and not the feelings that the stimuli elicited. While some theoretical models do include this avoidance of external events (Hasking et al., 2017; Nock & Prinstein, 2004), a number of models only focus on the avoidance of internal experiences (e.g., Chapman et al., 2006; Selby & Joiner, 2009).

Concluding comments

Our aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals who engage in NSSI and the role avoidance may or may not play in their NSSI. Providing clarity on the lived experience of avoidance could inform our theoretical understanding of both avoidance and NSSI, which in turn could inform the way we measure avoidance as a construct. Without this, it is difficult to fully understand or measure the construct of avoidance in relation to NSSI.

The findings of our study highlight that understanding avoidance in the context of NSSI is complicated. Participants did not resonate with the label of avoidance, but nonetheless, when we look at their descriptions of how it distracts from the internal states and external experiences, their experiences do map on to existing theoretical explanations of why individuals may engage or continue to engage in NSSI (Chapman et al., 2006; Hasking et al., 2017; Nock & Prinstein, 2004; Selby & Joiner, 2009). The findings from this study have theoretical implications regarding how we differentiate avoidance and distraction.

Concerns around the inconsistencies in the way avoidance is conceptualized have been previously raised by Hasking and colleagues (2017). They detailed how some authors conceptualized this as thought suppression (Najmi et al., 2007), a propensity to avoid unwanted emotions (Howe-Martin et al., 2012) or assess it using constructs that are assumed to be closely related to avoidance such as alexithymia (difficulty in expressing or differentiating one’s feelings, Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970; Anderson

& Crowther, 2012). Relating to this conceptualization of avoidance, the lack of a specific definitions around other constructs, including avoidance, has also been identified in the measures we use to assess emotion related constructs, which share considerable overlap (Haywood et al., 2022; Juarascio et al., 2020).

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of the language we use to conceptualize these constructs, such as avoidance, not only in research and theory, but also in measurement. From a research perspective, it raises the issue regarding how we can clearly delineate and define avoidance, or the specific aspects of it, so that they are specific to avoidance and not overlapping with similar constructs such as thought suppression or alexithymia. From a theoretical perspective, we need to consider refinement of our existing models. Rather than using the umbrella term avoidance as a “catch all” which can result in theoretical and measurement confusion, we need to be more specific in what avoidance is and what aspects of avoidance are associated with why an individual may engage in NSSI.

From a measurement perspective, existing questionnaires used to capture the construct of avoidance within NSSI should use language that resonates with individuals who engage in NSSI, and items should be representative of their experience, as well as reflect our theoretical understanding of the construct. Popular existing measures of avoidance such as the Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2014) include items that capture the external experience such as “I go out of my way to avoid uncomfortable situations,” yet this avoidance of external situations is not represented in some of our theoretical models which only focuses on the internal experience (Chapman et al., 2006; Selby & Joiner, 2009). Likewise, the above example uses the word “avoid,” which did not appear to resonate with individuals who engage in NSSI as a way of dealing with their emotions. Most participants viewed their behavior as distracting from their experience rather than avoiding it. They are aware this is not a long-term fix or solution and that the feelings will return, but they just need something, in that moment, to help them to cope. The issue we face with items that do not resonate with an individual’s experience is that they are likely to find measures confusing, or irrelevant, and are unlikely to endorse statements on the measure as being reflective of their experience (Synodinos, 2003).

A novel finding of this study was the pre-emptive function of NSSI. To our knowledge, none of the existing literature on NSSI consider this functionality of the behavior. This may be an area worth further investigation in future research as if this is a function of NSSI; it could inform clinical interventions on alternative ways of dealing with emotions.

Limitations of our study include the self-selectiveness of our sample; it may be that we only have the perspective of individuals that are comfortable discussing their experiences. A second consideration is that some participants discussed events that had occurred several years prior and therefore may be subject to potential memory errors or recall bias. Additionally, if participants had support from a mental health professional, increased emotional awareness may have influenced the lens through which they view their reasons for engagement in NSSI. While not a limitation for our study, as we were specifically interested in the university context, future research should consider recruiting community and clinical samples to see if the negative view of avoidance is shared within those groups.

In conclusion, individuals with lived experience of NSSI see their reasons for engaging as more than avoidance or not as avoidance. When asked explicitly about engaging in NSSI as a

way of avoiding their experiences, most people did not agree with this statement. The experience of NSSI was seen as an active way of dealing with both internal and external experiences. Participants were cognizant that engaging in self-injury was not a long-term solution, but rather a short-term distraction that allowed them to function in the moment. While the theoretical explanations of the role of avoidance in NSSI is in line with participants’ descriptions of their reasons for engaging in NSSI, the language we use does not appear to resonate with their experience or how they view their behavior. We know that avoidance is a multifaceted construct; however, our existing models appear to use the word as a global catch-all definition. The findings of this study suggest that by using terminology such as “avoidance.” We may be missing the nuances of avoidance, which has implications for how we measure avoidance and our current understanding of why people may begin and continue to engage in NSSI.

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