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Psychological distress, attachment, and conflict resolution in romantic relationships

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Abstract

Understanding the correlates of psychological distress has important implications for enhancing clinical treatments and promoting well-being and mental health in daily life. The present study examines the associations between attachment avoidance and anxiety, conflict resolution, and psychological distress in romantic relationships in a large sample ($N = 697$) recruited online. Anxiety and avoidance were associated with heightened psychological distress, and maladaptive conflict resolution strategies were found partially mediate these associations. Future directions and clinical implications highlighting attachment and conflict resolution are discussed.

Keywords: psychological distress, conflict resolution, attachment

Psychological Distress, Attachment, and Conflict Resolution in Romantic Relationships

Well-being and the frequent experience of happiness are markers of healthy living and contentedness with life in the fast-paced and stressful modern world. More specifically, psychological distress, the inverse of well-being, is a marker of an individual's current mental health. Considering the inherent social nature of humans (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), romantic relationships influence individuals' mental health and those who are in unhappy relationships report lower levels of subjective well-being (SWB; Dush & Amato, 2005). However, individual differences impact how people perceive and experience their relationships (Collins & Allard, 2001; Zeanah, Berlin, & Boris 2011) and adult attachment orientations may be associated with subsequent well-being as a function of relational processes. More specifically, the ways partners interact, particularly during attempts to resolve conflict, may be central to understanding how relationships impact individuals' happiness and mental health. The present study examines the association between psychological distress, conflict resolution, and attachment in romantic relationships, informing theory and practice on enhancing mental health.

Manifestations of psychological distress such as SWB have been the focus of much past research because of their ability to promote happiness and a greater quality of life (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002) and eliminating psychological distress leads to reductions in psychological symptomology and increases in daily mood (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). Indeed, higher well-being promotes more positive outcomes in life overall (Diener & Lucas, 2000). Experiencing greater well-being and less psychological distress generates an upward spiral, as it propagates more positive experiences and feelings (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Past research has demonstrated the impact of relationships on one's well-being, perceptions of self and life, and happiness (Dush & Amato, 2005; Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Horwitz, White, & Howell-White,

1996; Kurdek, 1991). Therefore, understanding the intrapersonal and relational correlates of psychological distress, which we conceptualize as an indicator of low SWB, has important implications for understanding, and ultimately improving, mental health.

With this in mind, it is important to consider how romantic relationships can impact psychological distress. Individuals' behaviors and feelings during interactions with partners are important relational processes, and are influenced by adult attachment orientations (Creasey, 2002). While attachment orientations develop in childhood (Bowlby, 1977), similar patterns occur throughout relationships in adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Attachment is conceptualized on two orthogonal dimensions of *anxiety* and *avoidance* (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Those who have high levels of anxiety typically fear being abandoned and have low feelings of self-worth, while people with greater avoidance are uncomfortable with emotional closeness and tend to be more self-reliant (Pistole, 1989). Individuals who are low on both dimensions are considered *secure*, while having high levels on any dimension is broadly considered an *insecure* form of attachment (Shi, 2003). There is not one permanent form of attachment for each individual—people can have varying levels and forms attachment in different relationships (Collins & Allard, 2001). Therefore, adult attachment in romantic relationships is useful to examine in order to specifically understand the working and changing model that the individual is experiencing when engaging with a partner.

Working models of attachment shape individuals' behavior within their relationships, as the levels of anxiety and avoidance affect their needs, behaviors, and emotions (Collins & Allard, 2001). Research has shown that people with insecure attachments approach conflict differently than secure people (Pistole, 1989). In the present study, we examine four dimensions of conflict resolution strategies, Conflict Engagement, Productive Problem-Solving, Withdrawal,

and Compliance. These four types of strategies reflect how conflicts are conceptualized on two continuums: direct-indirect and bilaterally-unilaterally (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). Direct strategies involve engaging with the problem in a straightforward manner, such as Productive Problem-Solving, while indirect strategies are typically roundabout methods, such as Compliance (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). The bilateral-unilateral continuum measures how much each conflict resolution tactic takes the other partner into account. The unilateral strategy does not consider the partner, while bilateral does the opposite (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). The dimensions of avoidance and anxiety predict conflict resolution strategies such as these; those who have insecure forms of attachment typically struggle in managing conflict, utilizing more negative conflict resolution tactics (Creasey, 2002; Shi, 2003; Volling, Notaro, & Larsen, 1998). More specifically, anxious individuals are less positive during problem discussions, tending to escalate their conflicts, and avoidant individuals behave less supportively and warmly during problem-solving (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Finally, having a secure model of attachment is associated with mutually-focused conflict strategies, such as compromising (Pistole, 1989; Shi, 2003).

Similarly, relationships and conflict resolution may affect one's self and well-being (Beach & Tesser, 1993). Conflict management is associated with psychological and self-esteem issues, forms of psychological distress (Creasey, 2002). Unequal power, as seen during conflict, has been repeatedly found to be associated with a lack of self-expression and lowered psychological health (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999; Neff & Suizzo, 2006). Under-benefiting from a relationship, particularly in conflict, can provoke anger and depression, while over-benefiting from a relationship can generate guilt (Galliher et al., 1999).

Attachment also impacts one's self-concept and emotional experiences in relationships (Collins & Read, 1990) and may be connected with psychological distress in the same way. Much research has explored self-esteem, an indicator of psychological distress, in relation to attachment; avoidant and secure individuals have high self-esteem, while those who are anxious have low self-esteem (Brennan & Morns, 1997; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004). Additionally, there is a strong association between depressive symptomology and romantic involvement in those with anxious attachment (Davila et al., 2004). Beyond self-esteem (Brennan & Morns, 1997), the link between psychological distress and attachment has not been examined by past research.

Thus, this study ultimately hopes to examine conflict resolution as a mediator of the association between attachment and psychological distress. As previously mentioned, those who are high on anxiety typically have difficulty with conflict (Campbell et al., 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Furthermore, because conflict and psychological distress are also associated, it is important to explore conflict resolution as a potential mediator between attachment and psychological distress (See Figure 1; Galliher et al., 1999; Creasey, 2002). It could be that the negative conflict resolution tactics utilized by the individual contribute to greater amounts of psychological distress, as a result of their anxious attachment. The present study hopes to provide a greater understanding of conflict resolution by examining attachment, the process through which problems in romantic relationships are addressed, and how this is associated with individual's well-being.

Summary and Hypotheses

Overall, the variables of psychological distress, attachment, and conflict resolution permeate multiple aspects of an individual's life and have important implications for broader well-being in romantic relationships. The following hypotheses are posited:

Hypotheses 1a. Attachment avoidance is positively associated with psychological distress.

Hypothesis 1b. Attachment anxiety is positively associated with psychological distress.

Hypothesis 2a. The association between attachment avoidance and psychological distress is mediated by conflict resolution tactics.

Hypothesis 2b. The association between attachment anxiety and psychological distress is mediated by conflict resolution tactics.

Method

Procedure

Participants in romantic relationships were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; www.mturk.com) and paid \$1 for completing the survey. The survey included measures assessing psychological distress, conflict resolution, and attachment power in romantic relationships, which were central to testing the current hypotheses and are described below, as well as measures of relationship satisfaction and commitment, and gender roles, which were not related to these hypotheses.

Participants

697 participants (42% male, 57% female, .6% transgendered) with an average age of 34.7 years ($SD = 20.7$) completed the survey.¹ All participants were in romantic relationships; the majority of the relationships were marriages or long-term committed relationships (50.6%; 4.0%

¹ Initial $N = 844$. Prior to data analysis we removed participants from repeated IP addresses (i.e., who possibility took the survey more than once), who took less than 10 minutes to complete the survey, or if they failed the attention checks.

casually dating, 37.6% steadily dating, 7.7% engaged) with an average relationship length of 7.2 years ($SD = 8.2$). The sexual orientation of the participants was predominantly heterosexual (71%; 9% gay, 10% lesbian, 10% bisexual). The majority of participants were white and non-Hispanic (80.2%; 8.9% Black, 5.3% Asian, 2.1% Other, 2.5% multi-racial; 8.3% Hispanic).

Measures

Brief Symptom Inventory-18 (BSI-18). The BSI-18 (Derogatis, 2000) measures the occurrence of 18 psychological symptoms across four dimensions—Depression, General Anxiety, Panic, and Somatization—into a comprehensive average score across the past week on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .95$). Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. Example items include *Feeling lonely* and *Trouble getting your breath*.

Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) Scale – Short form. Participants completed the 12-item short form of the ECR (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) which assesses the dimensions of attachment anxiety ($\alpha = .79$) and avoidance ($\alpha = .84$) on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). An example item is *I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down*. Higher scores on subscales indicate greater attachment anxiety and/or avoidance.

Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory. Four dimensions of conflict resolution in romantic relationships were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (Kurdek, 1994; 1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Example items include: *Launching personal attacks*, *Remaining silent for long periods of time*, and *Being too compliant*. Four items for each of the following conflict resolution strategies were presented: Conflict Engagement ($\alpha = .85$), Productive Problem-Solving ($\alpha = .79$), Withdrawal ($\alpha = .82$), and Compliance ($\alpha = .83$). Higher scores for each conflict resolution strategy indicate a greater usage of the strategies during conflict.

Results

In order to analyze our hypotheses, multiple regression and mediation analyses were used. Multiple regression, an extended form of linear regression, was completed to establish the relationships between attachment, conflict resolution, and psychological distress. Mediation analyses are a statistical model that seeks to specify the relationships between an independent and dependent variable through a third, separate variable. A Sobel test, which is a specialized form of a t-test, was utilized to determine whether conflict resolution tactics significantly mediated the association between attachment and psychological distress.

Testing Hypotheses 1a and 1b

Participants' measures of psychological distress were regressed on avoidance and anxiety. A significant positive association between psychological distress and avoidance was found ($\beta = .246, p < .001, R^2 = .261$). Similarly, there was a significant positive association between relationship quality and anxiety ($\beta = .362, p < .001, R^2 = .261$).

Testing Hypothesis 2a

Conflict engagement. In order to test the prediction that CE mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on avoidance ($\beta = .388, p < .001$). Avoidance was also significantly associated with CE ($\beta = .355, p < .001$). When avoidance and CE were included in a model predicting psychological distress, CE was associated with distress ($\beta = .323, p < .001$), and the effect of avoidance on psychological distress was reduced ($\beta = .312, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that CE partially mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress ($z = 4.98, p < .001$; see Figure 2).

Productive problem-solving. Because there was no significant association between PPS and psychological distress ($\beta = .018, n.s.$), the requisite conditions for mediation were not met and subsequent analyses were not conducted.

Withdrawal. In order to test the prediction that W mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on avoidance ($\beta = .388, p < .001$). Avoidance was also significantly associated with W ($\beta = .381, p < .001$). When avoidance and W were included in a model predicting psychological distress, W was associated with distress ($\beta = .322, p < .001$), and the effect of avoidance on psychological distress was reduced ($\beta = .310, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that W partially mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress ($z = 4.98, p < .001$; see Figure 3).

Compliance. In order to test the prediction that C mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on avoidance ($\beta = .388, p < .001$). Avoidance was also significantly associated with C ($\beta = .334, p < .001$). When avoidance and C were included in a model predicting psychological distress, C was associated with distress ($\beta = .350, p < .001$), and the effect of avoidance on psychological distress was reduced ($\beta = .305, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that C partially mediated the association between avoidance and psychological distress ($z = 5.53, p < .001$; see Figure 4).

Testing Hypothesis 2b

Conflict engagement. In order to test the prediction that CE mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on anxiety ($\beta = .459, p < .001$). Anxiety was also significantly associated with CE ($\beta = .340, p < .001$). When anxiety and CE were included in a model predicting psychological distress, CE was associated with distress ($\beta = .323, p < .001$), and the effect of anxiety on psychological distress was reduced

($\beta = .394, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that CE partially mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress ($z = 4.73, p < .001$; see Figure 5).

Productive problem-solving. Because there was no significant association between PPS and psychological distress, the requisite conditions for mediation were not met and analyses were not conducted.

Withdrawal. In order to test the prediction that W mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on anxiety ($\beta = .459, p < .001$). Anxiety was also significantly associated with W ($\beta = .294, p < .001$). When anxiety and W were included in a model predicting psychological distress, W was associated with distress ($\beta = .322, p < .001$), and the effect of anxiety on psychological distress was reduced ($\beta = .398, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that W partially mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress ($z = 4.85, p < .001$; see Figure 6).

Compliance. In order to test the prediction that C mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress, psychological distress was regressed on anxiety ($\beta = .459, p < .001$). Anxiety was also significantly associated with C ($\beta = .382, p < .001$). When anxiety and C were included in a model predicting psychological distress, C was associated with distress ($\beta = .350, p < .001$), and the effect of anxiety on psychological distress was reduced ($\beta = .380, p < .001$). The Sobel test was significant, indicating that C partially mediated the association between anxiety and psychological distress ($z = 5.03, p < .001$; see Figure 7).

Discussion

This study examined the associations between attachment, conflict resolution, and psychological distress, and our results highlight the complex nature of relationships, interpersonal conflicts, and individuals' mental health. The associations between these variables

are of significance in order to gain a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to psychological distress in romantic relationships and how it can be decreased.

As hypothesized, avoidance and anxiety were both positively associated with psychological distress. These findings are consistent with previous literature, as romantic involvement has a stronger relationship with forms of psychological distress, such as depressive symptomology, in those who have insecure attachment styles (Davila et al., 2004).

Next, the hypothesis regarding conflict resolution tactics as a mediator between attachment avoidance and psychological distress was largely supported. For both anxiety and avoidance, three forms of conflict resolution, CE, C, and W, were found to partially mediate the associations with psychological distress. This indicates that the three negative styles of conflict resolution each separately account for a part of the association between anxiety/avoidance and psychological distress. This is supported by previous literature, as attachment has been shown to affect which behaviors a person resorts to in conflict situations and has been associated with psychological distress (Campbell et al., 2005).

There were no significant associations found between psychological distress and productive problem-solving (PPS). PPS includes strategies such as compromising and negotiation; it is considered to be the healthiest conflict resolution technique (Kurdek, 1994). With this in mind, perhaps PPS has no relationship with psychological distress because it does not provoke a negative change like the other conflict resolution strategies. Even though the presence of conflict itself has been demonstrated to lower well-being (Creasey, 2002), it is possible that PPS acts as a neutralizer of conflict without affecting one's psychological symptoms. This untested possibility merits further research in the direct comparison of conflict resolution styles and their effectiveness.

These meditational analyses specifically demonstrate that we have identified a possible mechanism for the association between psychological distress and attachment in romantic relationships. However, because they are only partially related, there is a clear need for further research and identification of other constructs that may act as a mediator between attachment and psychological distress.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Directions

There are several limitations to consider when reflecting upon the hypotheses and results of the present study. First, conflict resolution was broadly conceptualized; we did not use precise domains or scenarios for conflict resolution. The broad nature of the measure may have brushed over the difficulties of romantic relationships. In order to understand more specifically the resolution of conflict in romantic relationships, it may be useful to adapt measures to be oriented towards the emotional difficulties of romantic involvement.

Next, we did not collect data from partners in the relationships. Having information about the second half of the relationship would have been useful for understanding the full dynamic between partners. This additional perspective would have been particularly helpful when considering attachment and forms of interpersonal engagement between partners like conflict resolution. Our lack of partner data results in a limited perspective on the experience of conflict in romantic relationships for both partners. Furthermore, our study was correlational and we therefore cannot infer any causality. While we have gained a sense of the associations between attachment, conflict resolution, and psychological distress, we cannot actually declare why or how they are linked together.

Additionally, our sample was largely white and in marriages/committed relationships. The dominance of highly committed relationships in the sample may have influenced the results.

Perhaps dating couples display different patterns of conflict resolution than those who are committed. Furthermore, there is a lack of generalizability of these findings to diverse populations. Romantic relationships present differently across cultures—conflict resolution tactics may therefore be distributed in varied trends in diverse samples (Neff & Suizzo, 2006).

Regardless of these limitations, the present study had several strengths. First, the sample size was very large, giving our analyses a great amount of statistical power. Furthermore, the MTurk population, despite seeming to lack diversity, has been found to be representative of the general population and produce similar results to diverse sampling methods (Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, & Freese, 2015). This study also included a wide-range of relationships, including both homosexual and heterosexual couples. The variety of sexualities allows for a broader and more diverse understanding of different romantic relationships.

With these limitations and strengths in mind, there are several important future directions for research on attachment, conflict resolution, and psychological distress to consider. Expanding the research on conflict within more relationship-specific domains would be a valuable addition to this field. For example, perhaps conflict resolution could be examined in more emotional scenarios, as opposed to more general questioning of which tactics used. Attempting to look more closely at the personal matters of relationship disagreements would allow for a more precise understanding of how individuals in romantic relationships engage in conflict.

Considering the continuums of attachment, further research should examine how well-being can be improved within romantic relationships in order to enhance overall mental health. For example, strategies for coping with attachment anxiety and avoidance, as well as for navigating conflict resolution, should be explored. Looking at strategies such as these more closely could increase mental health and generate self-perpetuating upward spirals of positivity

(Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Further research on psychological distress in romantic relationships promises to add to our understanding of mental health on the whole.

Additionally, research on conflict in romantic relationships should be extended to clinical populations. Instead of simply measuring psychological distress, research should focus on individuals struggling with mental illness and how that affects themselves and their relationships. The use of clinical populations could provide a new outlook on how relationships can be managed or changed in order to improve psychological symptoms, thereby informing clinicians and making treatment more efficacious.

Conclusions

On the whole, this study demonstrates the importance of considering attachment and psychological distress when examining romantic relationships, both from a theoretical and real-world perspective. The significance of avoidance and anxiety in relationships indicates how an individual's behavior and emotional experiences can affect relationships. In turn, understanding how couples handle conflicts creates a well-rounded perception on how individuals behave in and maintain romantic relationships. On the whole, the development of conflict resolution as an aspect of attachment helps bolster the research surrounding well-being and psychological distress in the context of romantic relationships.

On a more practical level, this study demonstrates how important conflict resolution tactics in romantic relationships are to an individual's psychological health. Understanding the effect of romantic relationship dynamics on individuals is promising for future clinical applications. The consideration of how conflicts are resolved in a relationship could enhance clinical practices such as couples therapy and dating violence prevention. Thus, psychological distress in romantic relationships remains a field worthy of further exploration; the present study

indicates a rich area of research, promising a greater understanding of human interactions, mental health, and relationships.

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Figures

Figure 1. Attachment predicting psychological distress, mediated by conflict resolution.

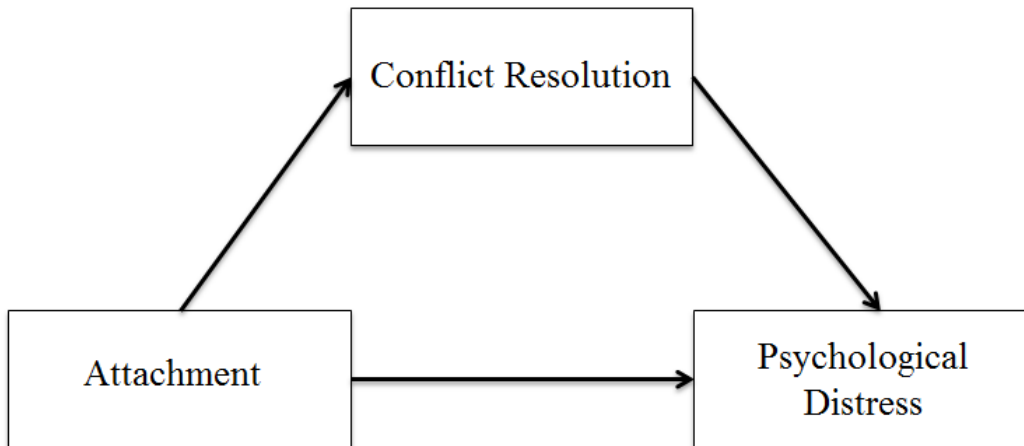


Figure 2. Avoidance predicting psychological distress, mediated by conflict engagement, $**p < .005$.

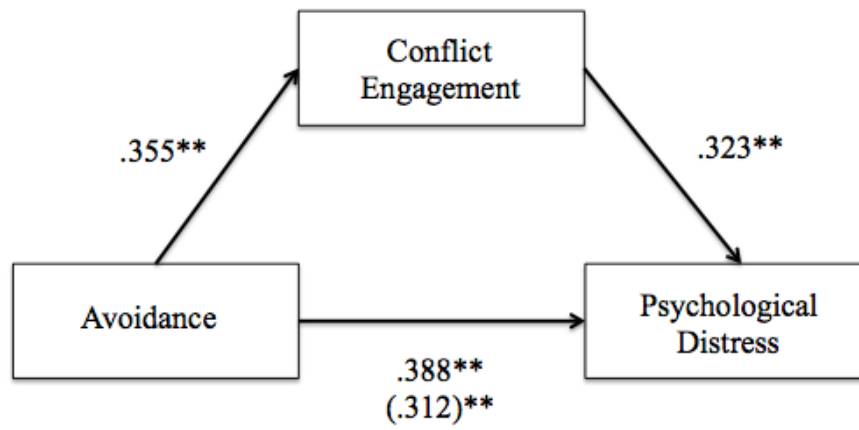


Figure 3. Avoidance predicting psychological distress, mediated by withdrawal. $**p < .005$.

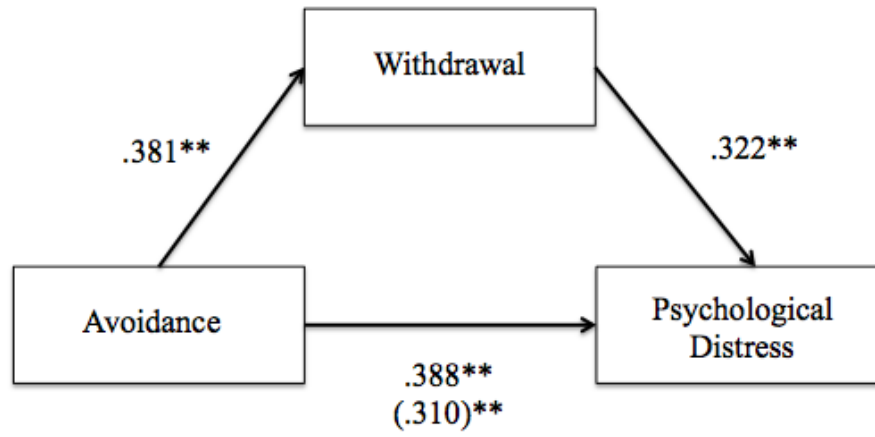


Figure 4. Avoidance predicting psychological distress, mediated by compliance. $**p < .005$.

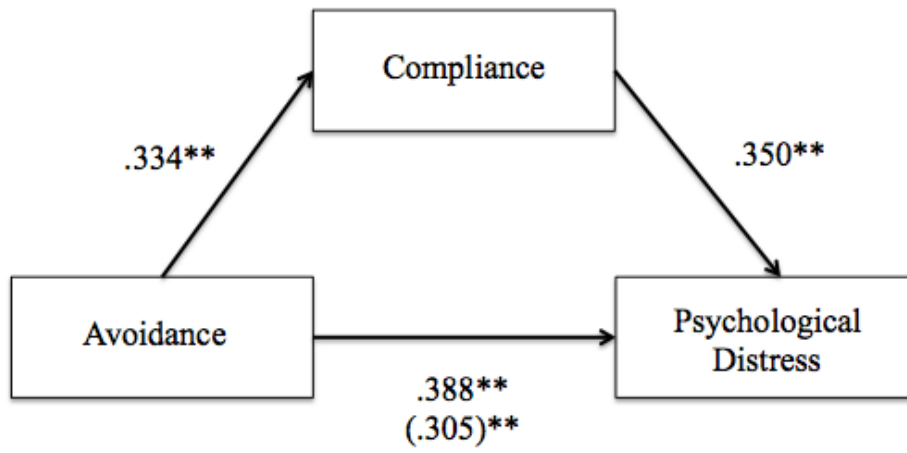


Figure 5. Anxiety predicting psychological distress, mediated by conflict engagement. $**p < .005$

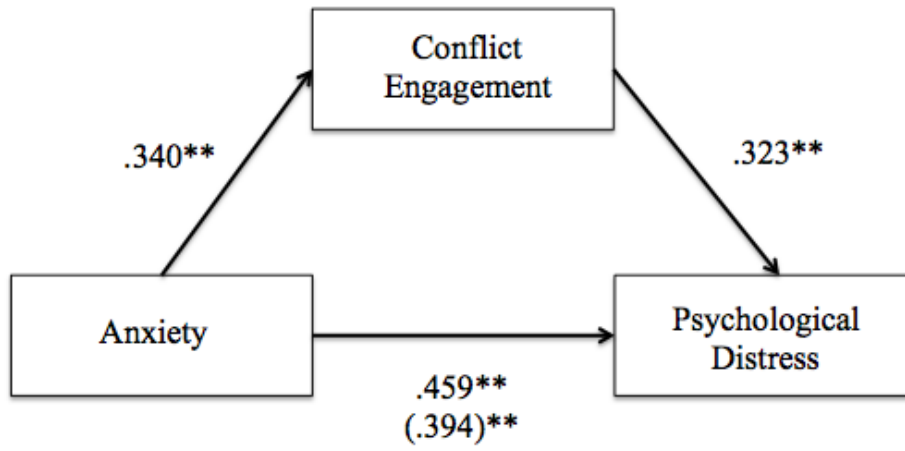


Figure 6. Anxiety predicting psychological distress, mediated by withdrawal. $**p < .005$.

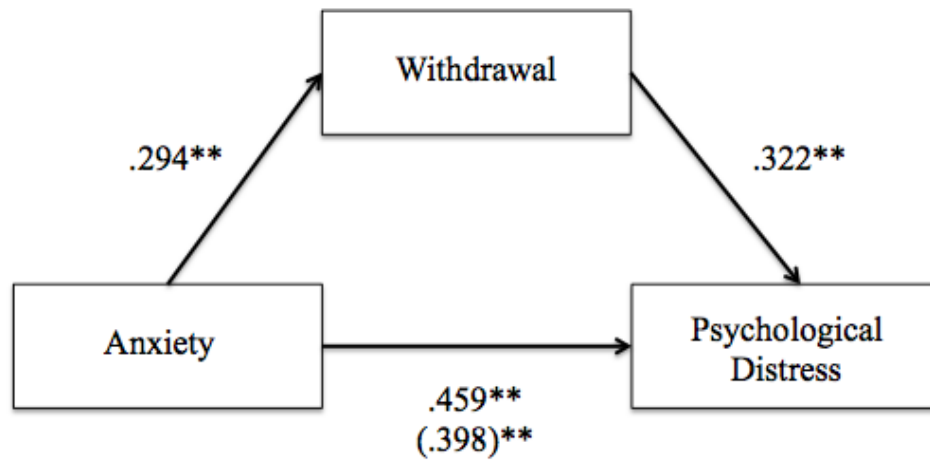


Figure 7. Anxiety predicting psychological distress, mediated by compliance. $**p < .005$.

