

# Reactive Avoidance: A New Perspective on Behavioral Addictions

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# **“Addictive” and compulsive behaviors often seen in clinical populations**

- Compulsive sexual behavior
- Compulsive gambling
- Compulsive stealing
- Compulsive buying
- Bingeing and purging

# Potential etiologies

- Borderline personality disorder
- Impulse control disorders
- Behavioral addictions
- New empirically-based attachment/emotional regulation models
  - *Reactive Avoidance model (RAm)*



# Reactive Avoidance model

- Early childhood maltreatment or disattunement →
- painful implicit memories and attachment disturbance →
- reduced emotional regulation skills

Emotional dysregulation + triggers →

Need for distress reduction behaviors (DRBs),  
dissociation, substance abuse)

# Functions of reactive avoidance behaviors

- Soothing
- Distraction
- Communication
- To reduce dissociation
  - Hebb's optimal arousal curve
- Relief from guilt and shame through self-punishment
- Distress-incompatible states

# Safety, stabilization, and harm reduction

- Use therapeutic relationship to stabilize
- Increase emotional regulation skills
  - Grounding, relaxation, breath training, mindfulness training
  - Emotional detective work
  - Metacognitive awareness of triggered states



# Trigger management

- Harm reduction
  - Delay as long as possible
  - Do as little as possible
  - Replacing versus distracting
- Psychoeducation on triggers
- Identification: Direct and indirect
- Urge/emotion “surfing”
  - You can’t stop a wave, but you can learn to surf (Kabat-Zinn)
  - Half-life of triggered distress

# Titrated emotional processing

- Only when stable, able to tolerate exposure
- Therapeutic window dynamics
- Multiple targets
- Shorter exposure periods
- Interspersal



## Suggested readings

Briere, J. (2019). *Treating Risky and Compulsive Behavior in Trauma Survivors* NY: Guilford.

Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2014). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, DSM-5 update*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- (Third edition due in 2022)