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Nexus, uncovered: on the relations between expectancy, avoidance, and somatic sensations

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Citation

Nadinda, P. G. (2025, September 10). *Nexus, uncovered: on the relations between expectancy, avoidance, and somatic sensations*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260136>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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CHAPTER 1



General Introduction

Our body is made up of complex systems that interact to keep us alive. It is equipped with bodily signals that tell us what we need and when we are in danger. Pain and itch for example, signal that there is potential damage or threat occurring in the body due to internal or external stimuli that urge the individual to act (Liu & Ji, 2013; Raja et al., 2020; Ross, 2011; Wall, 1979). Other sensations, like fatigue, can signal that our body needs rest and sustenance (Boullosa & Nakamura, 2013; Noakes, 2012). These bodily sensations are necessary to protect the body from impending harm by letting us know what cues should be avoided and what cues could be approached (Lenaert et al., 2018; Walters & Williams, 2019). But what happens when these bodily signals prolong? Imagine a car alarm that turns on at the slightest touch, or a smoke detector that cannot be turned off even after the fire has been extinguished. How would we know when to react? How would we know that we are no longer in danger?

Between 10 – 20% of people worldwide (even in childhood) experience chronic somatic symptoms (Petersen et al., 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2020; Vesterling et al., 2023) which are somatic sensations that occur for an extended period of time and therefore affects daily functioning. A notable example of a chronic somatic symptom is chronic pain, which is defined by the International Association for the Study of Pain as pain that lasts for at least three months in duration (Treede et al., 2019). It is often associated with psychological suffering and has been shown to be one of the largest causes of economic burden and disability worldwide (Cohen et al., 2021; Phillips, 2009). Similarly, chronic itch, defined as itch that persists for at least six weeks (Stander et al., 2007) is often associated with persistent scratching which, especially when coupled with a chronic (visible) skin condition, may cause stigmatization (Silverberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, the presence of chronic somatic symptoms, like chronic pain, chronic itch, as well as chronic fatigue, can also impact sleep (Eccles & Davies, 2021; Racine et al., 2016) and especially affect daily functioning as it leads to avoidance of activities that would trigger (the amplification of) somatic sensations (Cole et al., 2021; Gerbershagen et al., 2002; Van Heck & de Vries, 2002). As chronic somatic symptoms can greatly interfere with daily life, it is imperative that the causes and mechanisms behind chronic somatic symptoms are identified.

For many years, there has been a large focus on finding a single cause to the development of chronic somatic symptoms, but it has become increasingly clear that a single cause cannot always be ascertained and that a comprehensive approach is needed by looking at a series of interactions between different factors and processes that influence chronic somatic symptoms (Vlaeyen et al., 2022). Already in the 1970s, researchers began to shift away

from a solely biomedical perspective to a more holistic approach to understanding chronic somatic symptoms by including a psychological and social perspective to the biomedical model as proposed by George Engel (Engel, 1977). From this, the biopsychosocial model was born and applied to a number of chronic somatic symptoms, including chronic pain and chronic itch, which are thought to be influenced by an amalgamation of biological (e.g., genetics, age), psychological (e.g., expectancies, affect), social (e.g., culture, social interactions), and behavioral (e.g., avoidance) factors that work together to influence both the perception and maintenance of somatic sensations (Gatchel et al., 2007; Melzack, 2001; Verhoeven et al., 2008). This shift in focus to include psychological and social factors has triggered a myriad of research into cognitive-affective and behavioral mechanisms that can be targeted in treatment to complement the biomedical approach. In this regard, two factors have been identified as key mechanisms in the perception and maintenance of chronic somatic symptoms: expectancies (cognitive) and avoidance (behavior).

EXPECTANCIES:

Effects on somatic perception and behavior?

Expectations, or expectancies, can be generally defined as an anticipation of something that will or is about to happen. While the term expectations and expectancies have often been used interchangeably, the term expectancies often encompass the broader concept of expecting and/or predicting, whereas expectations refer to specific or concrete predictions (Janzen et al., 2006).

Expectancies have been shown to shape the perception of somatic sensations. For example, negative expectancies can lead to the aggravation of sensations whereas positive expectancies can lead to alleviation (Evers et al., 2019; Peerdeman et al., 2016; Wolters et al., 2019). These expectancies can be acquired from either instructional learning (i.e., verbal suggestions), experiential learning (e.g. classical conditioning), and/or observational learning (e.g., by observing how others react) (Atlas & Wager, 2012; Blythe et al., 2023; Thomaidou et al., 2023).

There are individual differences in the degree to which expectancies influence somatic perception. It can be partly explained by neural differences (such as increased activity in specific brain regions; Koban et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2007) and trait differences (such as optimism and suggestibility; Kern et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2025), but to date, no single cause that explains these individual differences has been consistently identified (Warner,

2023). Nevertheless, targeting expectancies have been shown to be useful in clinical practice as expectancies can be modified with new information that is gained from interactions with others and daily life experiences (see **Chapter 2** for further details). In addition to influencing somatic perception, expectancies also hold an important function in daily life. More specifically, they help to orient us towards certain actions that may lead to a desirable outcome, or away from behaviors that may lead to an undesirable effect (Roesse & Sherman, 2007). One specific form of behavior that expectancies can influence in the context of chronic somatic symptoms is avoidance.

AVOIDANCE:

Role in somatic sensation and expectancies?

Avoidance is a type of action that is performed in anticipation of an unwanted cue as opposed to in reaction to something (the latter would be defined as escape), and can be both behavioral and cognitive (e.g., attentional avoidance). In somatic sensations, avoidance is an evolutionary reaction to protect the body from something that may be damaging. For example, we learn to avoid electric fences to prevent pain from electrocution, or to avoid poison ivy to prevent itchy skin rashes. However, these avoidance behaviors often come at a cost, such as having a limited range of motion when avoiding certain movements or having limited clothing options when avoiding certain types of itch-inducing clothes. Furthermore, too much avoidance can lead to the opposite of the desired effect, where instead of preventing the occurrence of an aversive sensation, it can instead lead to more somatic sensations. Indeed, this is what was theorized in the fear-avoidance model. The fear-avoidance model was first introduced in 1983 in the context of chronic pain (Crombez et al., 2012; Lethem et al., 1983; Vlaeyen et al., 2016), and parts of it has since been applied to chronic itch (Silverberg et al., 2018), and chronic fatigue (Bol et al., 2010). This model posits that when an individual experiences a somatic sensation (e.g., pain), they can interpret this sensation as something that can be experienced from time to time, or as something that is catastrophic. If somatic sensations are interpreted as something that is catastrophic, it can trigger a prolonged avoidance reaction, which instead of preventing the unwanted sensation, may paradoxically lead to worsening. According to this model, a major cause of this paradoxical effect is the restriction in physical activities (meaning that one has less experience with certain somatic sensations) which can increase the risk of somatic sensitivity (Kroska, 2016; Vlaeyen & Linton, 2000). Thus, avoidance no longer has the same protective properties long-term.

Since the initial development of the fear-avoidance model, a multitude of studies have been conducted to pinpoint how the fear-avoidance relationship contributes to the maintenance of chronic somatic symptoms, particularly in the field of pain. A major development in the field of pain is the finding that the fear-avoidance relationship is context dependent, meaning that even if one is fearful of a somatic sensation, they may not necessarily perform avoidance behaviors if there are other goals that motivate a different behavior (Meulders, 2020; Vlaeyen et al., 2016). The role of context illustrates the complexity in the interaction between cognitive-affective and behavioral factors behind chronic somatic symptoms, which still require further evaluation.

SOMATIC SENSATIONS:

Influenced by the interplay between expectancies and avoidance?

As described so far, both expectancies and avoidance play a major role in somatic perception. Expectancy is one of the main drivers of avoidance, and avoidance can aggravate somatic sensations and perception in the long term. However, there are a few gaps in the field that warrant investigation. Firstly, most studies on the relationship between expectancy and avoidance have mainly been done in pain, and very little on other somatic sensations; thus, it is unclear whether certain expectancy-avoidance relationships are sensation specific (e.g., occurs only in pain), or whether they can be generalized across all types of somatic sensations (e.g., occurs in pain, itch, and fatigue). Secondly, from the limited research investigating the relationship between expectancy and avoidance, it is still unclear how these two factors interact with one other across time. Finally, although there are indications that expectancies influence avoidance behavior, there are no studies that investigate the causal relation between the two mechanisms across different types of somatic sensations, and even fewer studies investigating the opposite relation, i.e., the effect of avoidance on expectancies, neither in individuals with chronic somatic symptoms nor in individuals without such symptoms. Therefore, it is important to address these gaps in research as it not only advances the knowledge of understudied mechanisms in different somatic sensations but can also help us identify specific interactions that can be targeted in treatment that may be applicable across different types of chronic somatic symptoms.

THE CURRENT DISSERTATION

This dissertation aims to investigate the relationship between expectancies and avoidance behavior in different somatic sensations. We specifically investigate this relationship on pain, itch, and fatigue as these mechanisms share the same evolutionary role to protect the body and have been shown to share similar transdiagnostic factors that maintain them (discussed further in **Chapter 2**). Different methods were used to investigate this relationship, from theoretical review to experimental studies and ecological momentary assessments, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the expectancy-avoidance relationship within the context of somatic sensations.

In **Chapter 2** we summarize the current state of the art on the relationship between expectancy and avoidance across three chronic somatic symptoms namely: pain, itch, and fatigue. This chapter presents theoretical evidence on the expectancy-avoidance relationship that has been put forth throughout the years and proposes a new integrative model of chronic somatic symptoms taking into account major frameworks across different fields, specifically the predictive coding and active inference perspective.

Chapter 3 takes the first step into directly assessing the influence of expectancies on avoidance behavior in pain. This chapter covers two related studies that investigate whether negative expectancy learning increases pain and pain-avoidance behavior. *Study 1* investigates this relationship using a novel pain avoidance task designed to experimentally mimic the cost-benefit ratio of performing avoidance behavior in daily life, while *Study 2* replicates the design of *Study 1* with improvements to the avoidance task based on results from *Study 1*.

To follow up, we conducted the first experimental study assessing the causal role of expectancies and avoidance in the field of itch in **Chapter 4**. As studies investigating the relation between expectancies and avoidance behavior in itch are scarce, we specifically aimed to evaluate whether negative expectancies led to more costly itch related avoidance behavior. This relationship was investigated using a novel itch-avoidance paradigm in which avoidance was measured using effortful gripping.

To study mechanisms in chronic somatic symptoms, it is important to not only test them, but to also observe the mechanisms in individuals with lived experiences. Thus, in **Chapter 5**, we conducted a study exploring the relationship between avoidance, expectancies, pain, and other psychological mechanisms that constitute cognitive-affective and behavioral factors in individuals with chronic low back pain. This study measured individuals' pain and

psychological mechanisms throughout the day across two weeks and utilized the network approach to compute and visualize the connections between pain and related cognitive-affective and behavioral factors.

Finally, **Chapter 6** summarizes the findings of this dissertation and discusses the implications of the expectancy-avoidance relationship in somatic sensations. This chapter also addresses the limitations of this dissertation and explores directions for future research.

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