

Avoidance and Regulating Our Emotions

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Amanda Meier (MSW, RSW)
Andreia Barreiro (MDiv, RP)



Agenda

- Introduction to Avoidance
- Why we Avoid
- Impact of Avoidance
- Healthier Coping Strategies

Avoidance isn't necessarily negative
and isn't always a choice.



Importance of Emotions

- Emotions are complex reaction patterns involving physiological, experiential, and behavioural elements.
- Emotions are not inherently negative or positive.

Function of Emotions

1. Communicate to ourselves
2. Communicate to others
3. Organize and motivate behaviour



Source: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/collective-emotions-and-covid-19>

What is Avoidance?

Avoidance: keeping away from particular situations, environments, individuals, or things because of either (a) the anticipated negative consequence of such an encounter or (b) anxious or painful feelings associated with them.

Avoidance Coping: any strategy for managing a stressful situation in which a person does not address the problem directly but instead disengages from the situation and averts attention from it.



Ways that We Avoid



by KC Green. Source: <https://www.theverge.com/2016/5/5/11592622/this-is-fine-meme-comic>

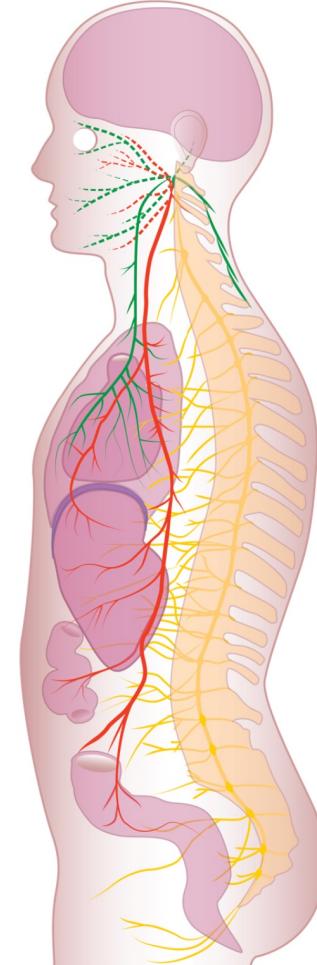
1. Escapism (seeking distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy)
2. Substance Use and Misuse
3. Social Isolation
4. Compartmentalization (thoughts and feelings that seem to conflict with one another are isolated from one another)
5. Overregulation of Emotions (suppressing, minimizing, or shutting down emotions)
6. Procrastination (which is different than laziness!)

Why Do We Avoid?

The human nervous system is designed to shut down in the face of immense danger or stress.

Avoidance is **protective, accessible and effective** in short-run.

It provides almost immediate relief which makes it very reinforcing.



We All Avoid



Moderate levels of avoidance are okay because we cannot effectively face intense emotions and stressful situations all the time

Avoidance can temporarily reduce stress and prevent anxiety from becoming overwhelming

Avoidance can provide relief from difficult situations that we cannot change (e.g. COVID-19)

Source: Shutterstock

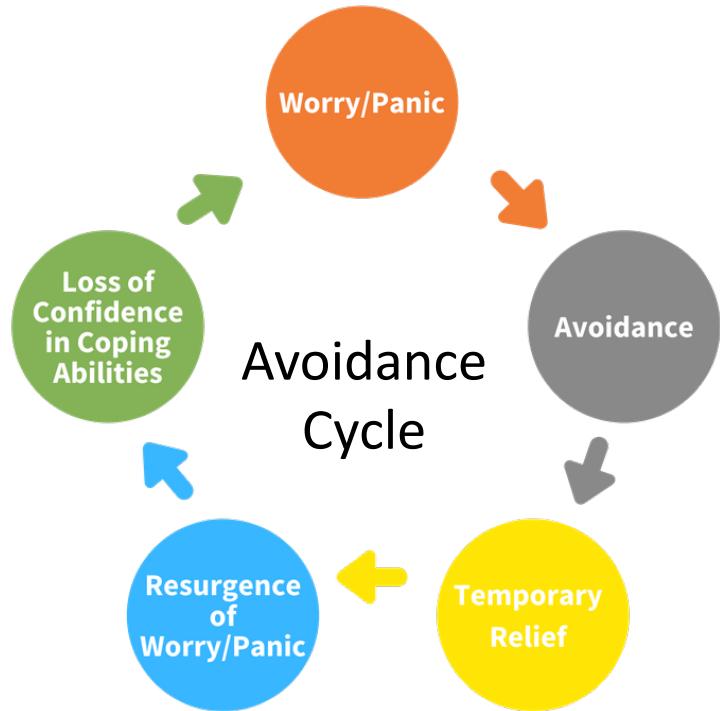
Impact of Excessive Avoidance

Attempts to control and avoid emotions actually maintain and intensify emotional distress.

Avoidance teaches us that uncomfortable emotions are “bad” and reduces our belief that we can tolerate and deal with them.

Avoidance prevents us from fully engaging in life and relationships.

It is exhausting!



Source: <https://www.foothillsacademy.org/community/articles/step-out-of-anxiety>

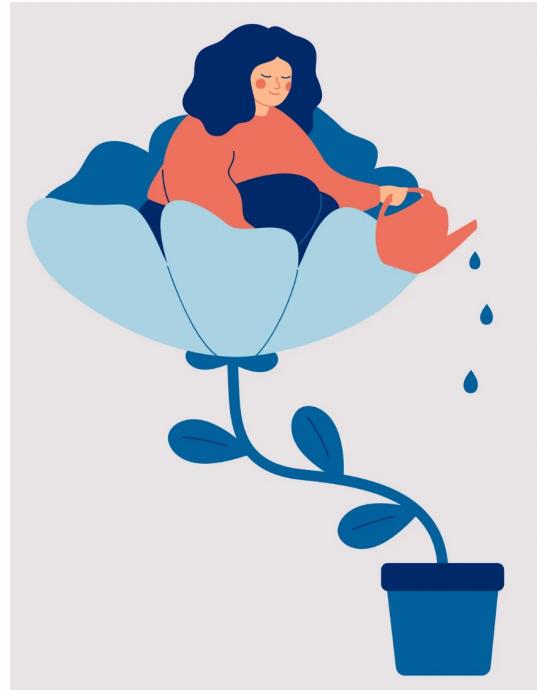
Moving from Avoidance to Healthier Coping

1. Recognize avoidance

- Reflect on today's presentation and consider the ways you avoid
- Be curious (without judgment) as to what you are avoiding and why

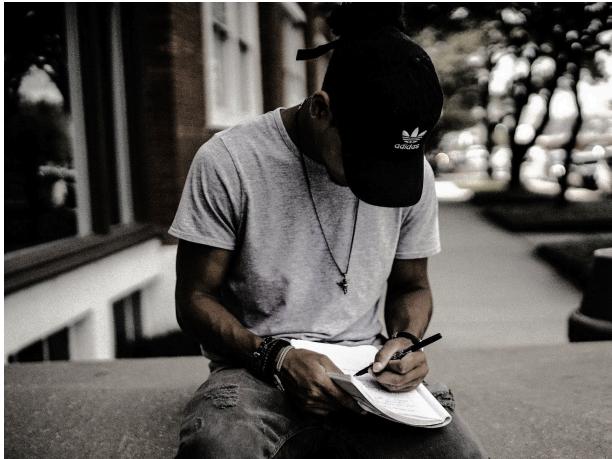
2. Practice self-compassion

- Remember that avoidance is protective and serves a purpose
- Showing self-compassion for avoidance is more effective to generate change than self-criticism or pressure



by Ponomariova_Maria / Getty Images. Source: <https://www.self.com/story/therapist-coping-skills>

Moving from Avoidance to Healthier Coping



3. Identify values and goals

- Ask yourself: How do I want to live my life? What kind of person do I want to be? What principles do I want to stand for?
- Set goals that can move you in the direction of your values
- Share goals and plans with others

4. Identify behaviours that can help support the pursuit of your values and goals

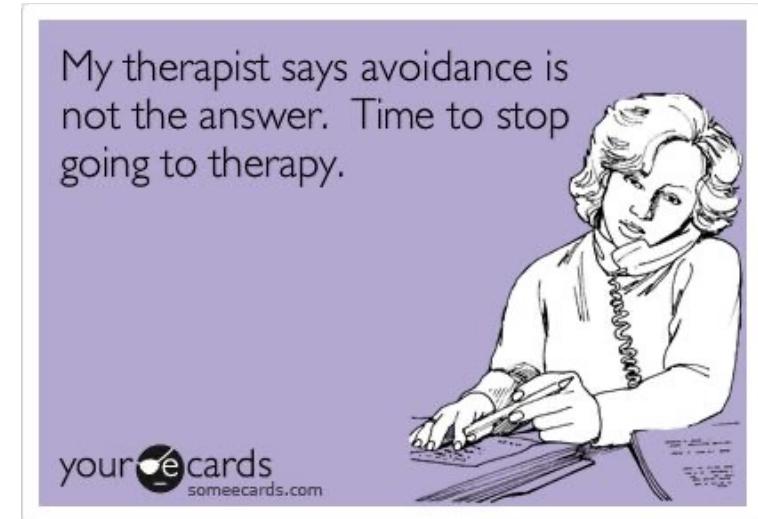
- Journaling
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Therapy

Source: <https://ourselvesblack.com/journal/2017/3/29/beyond-dear-diary-journaling-is-a-proven-way-to-improve-mental-health-conditions>

Moving from Avoidance to Healthier Coping

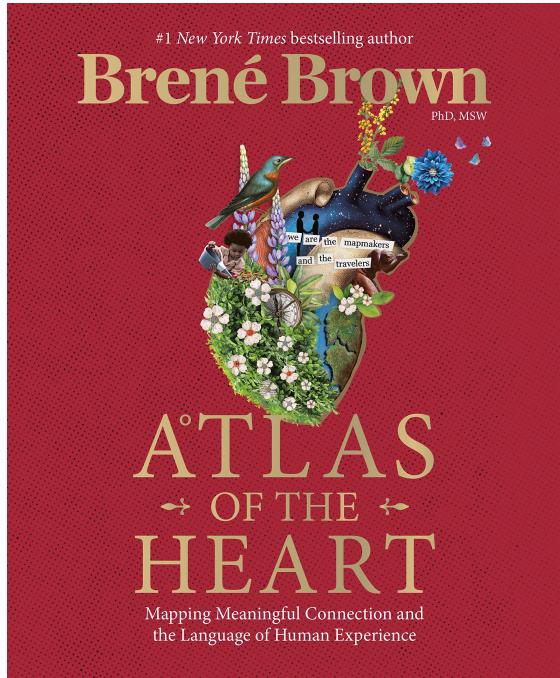
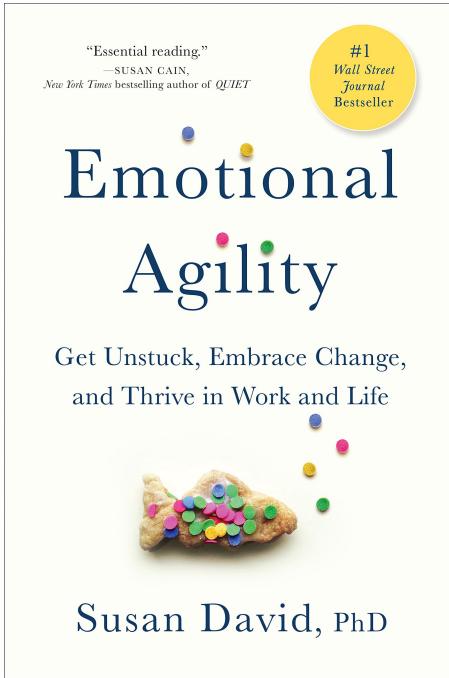
5. Balance engagement and avoidance

- Trying to avoid all avoidance will be overwhelming
- Find realistic ways to pursue goals/face fears (e.g. small steps, time limits) while giving yourself space to take breaks



Source: someecards.com

Extra Resources



amandameiertherapy
@gmail.com



info@pluspt.ca

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Questions?

amandameiertherapy@gmail.com



info@pluspt.ca