


Identifying Emotional Avoidance Strategies

Emotion regulation

 Exercise

 15 min.

 Client

 No

One way people attempt to control their emotional experiences is through emotional avoidance. Emotional avoidance is when we engage in behaviours designed to prevent ourselves from experiencing strong, and oftentimes unwanted, emotions. Emotional avoidance can be behavioural or cognitive. Some behavioural strategies are more obvious, such as when a person with social anxiety declines a party invitation to avoid entering a situation that will cause them emotional distress. But people also do less obvious things to avoid internal discomfort, such as attending a social gathering but avoiding making eye contact, or making an excuse to leave early; taking medication; and, asking a friend to accompany one to an anxiety-provoking event. Cognitive avoidance strategies entail anything one might do to avoid having to think about, remember, or pay attention to something that is emotionally distressing, for example, distraction (e.g., watching television, scrolling through social media), rumination (i.e., repetitively going over a thought or a problem without completion or resolution), or trying to force oneself to think of something other than the situation at hand. Engaging in any form of emotional avoidance prevents people from learning that the situation is not dangerous, and reinforces the idea that uncomfortable or painful emotional experiences are overwhelming and intolerable. Avoidance strategies tend to be helpful for alleviating distress in the short term, but tend to make things worse in the long term.

Avoiding emotions (as well as other private events such as thoughts, urges, memories, and so on) is thought to be one of the most pathological processes one can do. The deliberate attempt to avoid or escape from difficult emotions can paradoxically increase their occurrence and intensity, and can diminish the effect of exposure-based strategies. Research has revealed that emotional avoidance predicts negative outcomes in depression (DeGenova et al., 1994), substance misuse



Author

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Goal

This exercise is designed to help clients develop greater awareness of their patterns of emotional avoidance. Clients will develop an understanding of how avoidance of emotions maintains current patterns of emotional responding in the long term, and this will make space for them to develop new, more helpful behavioural responses to intense emotions.



Advice

- This tool helps clients become aware of their usual emotional avoidance strategies and the effect of these on their functioning and well-being. A helpful next step would be to explore

ways in which the client can replace current avoidance-based coping with acceptance-based coping strategies. “The Unwanted Guest” tool and “The Consequences of Experiential Avoidance” in the toolkit may be a helpful place to start, as this tool offers clients insight in the long-term consequences of emotional avoidance and importance of acceptance-based coping.

- Clients who struggle to identify their avoidance strategies may benefit from daily registration. On a daily basis, clients may reflect on ways in which they attempt to avoid emotions or situations that may trigger emotions.



Suggested Readings

Barlow, D. H., Ellard, K. K., & Fairholme, C. P. (2010). *Unified protocol for transdiagnostic treatment of emotional disorders: Workbook*. Oxford University Press.

DeGenova, M. K., Patton, D. M., Jurich, J. A., & MacDermid, S. M. (1994). Ways of coping among HIV-infected individuals. *Journal of Social Psychology, 134*, 655-663.

Hayes, S. C. (2004). Acceptance and commitment therapy, relational frame theory, and the third wave of behavioral and cognitive therapies. *Behavior Therapy, 35*, 639-665.

Heatherton, T. F., & Baumeister, R. F. (1991). Binge eating as escape from self-awareness. *Psychological Bulletin, 110*(1), 86.

Ireland, S. J., McMallon, R. C., Malow, R. M., & Kouzekanani, K. (1994). Coping style as a predictor of relapse to cocaine abuse. In L. S. Harris (Ed.), *Problem of drug dependence, 1993: Proceedings of the 55th annual scientific meeting*. (National Institute on Drug Abuse Monograph Series No. 141, p. 158). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Tool Description

Instructions

Emotional avoidance is when we do things to avoid or prevent ourselves from experiencing strong, painful emotions. While emotional avoidance may alleviate our distress in the short term, it tends to make things worse in the long term, and paradoxically, our emotional pain can even become more intense as a result. The ways in which we avoid painful emotional experiences are many and varied, and looks different for everyone (e.g., declining a party invitation to avoid an anxiety-provoking social situation or going home sick from work to avoid giving a presentation), but the outcome is always the same: increased suffering. The purpose of this exercise is to help you begin to see some of the subtle ways that you may try to avoid unpleasant emotions in your daily life.

Step 1: Introduce avoidance

There are many ways in which we try to not feel certain emotions. For instance, we may try to act in such a way that we will not encounter the situation that may trigger the emotion we wish to avoid. For instance, in order to not experience feelings of rejection, we may avoid social situations. Likewise, we may try to prevent ourselves from feeling nervous about giving a presentation by pretending to be ill or taking medication.

We may also try to not feel emotions when we are already in a situation we cannot physically escape. For example, we may distract ourselves by watching television or force ourselves to think about something other than the situation at hand. These are mind games or techniques that we can use to not feel the emotion that is present.

Below is a list with some common examples of ways to get away from your feelings:

- binge watching television
- playing video games
- spending time on social media
- drinking alcohol
- smoking cigarettes
- turning off your phone or staying away from friends
- exercising too much
- worrying over and over again about something you can't control
- using drugs
- using medications in ways your doctor did not prescribe
- cutting or harming yourself in other ways
- storming out to avoid a conversation
- lying about how you feel
- skipping work
- sleeping too much
- staying in bed
- binge eating (eating a lot of fattening food at the same time)
- complaining too much to others
- placing blame
- telling yourself, "Suck it up" or "It's no big deal"
- (online) shopping

Step 2: Consider usual emotional avoidance strategies

Reflect on three situations in your life where you avoided rather than approached and embraced a difficult or painful emotion. These could be related to work, or a personal relationship, or an area of your life where things don't seem to be running smoothly. For instance, perhaps you pretended to feel sick at work so that you could leave and avoid giving a presentation, or maybe you declined a colleague's invitation for lunch because you were afraid of maintaining social conversation outside of the office, or perhaps you binge-watched television until you fell asleep to distract yourself from thinking about a recent argument with a friend.

As you bring these personal situations to mind, reflect on (1) what emotions they brought about for you, (2) how you tried to prevent yourself from feeling these emotions at that moment, and (3) how effective you were in not feeling these emotions. List your responses in the space below.

Completed example

Situation: *My boss asked me to present at an upcoming staff meeting to update the team on my project's progress.*

Difficult emotion(s): *Anxiety, stress*

Emotional avoidance strategy: *Pretended I was sick on the day of the staff meeting, and so stayed home from work.*

Result/Effectiveness: *As soon as I called in sick, I felt better - a strong sense of relief. There were some feelings of guilt and disappointment in myself, but these were minor compared to how relieved I felt. However, the anxiety and stress quickly returned the next week, when my boss asked me to speak at the next staff meeting. I felt perhaps even more anxious and stressed this next time.*

Situation #1:

Difficult emotion(s):

Emotional avoidance strategy:

Result/Effectiveness:

Situation #2:

Difficult emotion(s):

Emotional avoidance strategy:

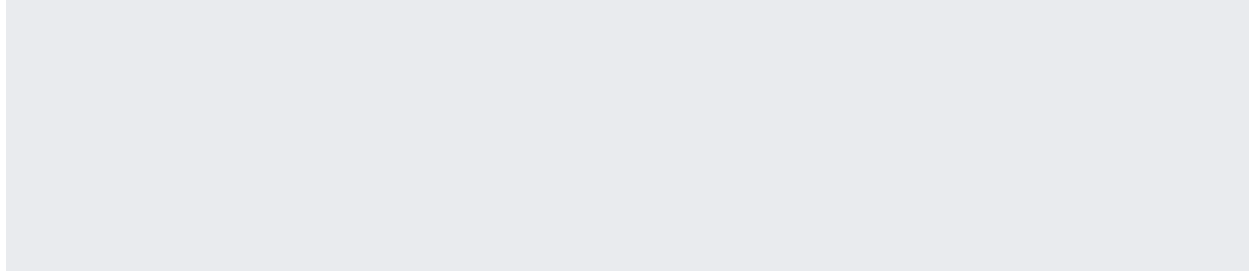
Result/Effectiveness:

Situation #3:

Difficult emotion(s):

Emotional avoidance strategy:

Result/Effectiveness:



Step 3: Evaluation

Discuss the following:

- What was this exercise like?
- Can you see any patterns in the type of emotional avoidance strategies you tend to use throughout your life? For instance, do you commonly distract yourself, or do you frequently turn to food or other substances?
- For each of the three situations, how could you have responded in the opposite way (i.e., by employing an emotional approach strategy)? What might be the result/effect of this?
- What insights have you gained, and what can you take away from this exercise?
- What was easy or difficult about the exercise?