

 Emotion Regulation
 Exercise

 2-5 min.

 Client

 No


The Consequences of Experiential Avoidance

Once clients experience negative emotions, such as anger, fear or sadness, their immediate, natural response is often to avoid these feelings. This is referred to as experiential avoidance, where a client is unwilling to continue being in touch with particular experiences. A client subsequently takes steps to avoid these specific sensations (Hayes et al, 2004). Suppression is one way of trying to achieve this avoidance. Although experiential avoidance may work in the short-term, it will not work in the long-term. Past research has shown that experiential avoidance is linked with a great diversity of negative outcomes (see Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996, for a review).

Goal

By using a scenario, this exercise aims to make a client aware of the long-term effects of experiential avoidance. The point of the exercise is to convey the pitfalls of experiential avoidance.

Advice

A core component of mindfulness is acceptance of inner states. Rather than avoiding them, mindfulness requires willingness to stay in contact with (aversive) states, without reacting to them (Bishop, 2002). However, especially when negative emotions or feelings are strong, it can be very difficult to accept them entirely. Avoidance offers a quick solution: we do not feel the pain and the burden that comes with the negative state. This exercise can make clients aware that in the long run, avoidance will never help to solve their problems. It can be valuable to draw a link between the scenario used in this exercise, and the client's specific situation. This exercise can also be used in an educational context to teach the consequences of avoidance.

Suggested Readings

Hayes, S. C., Follette, V. M., & Linehan, M. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Hayes, S. C., Wilson, K. G., Gifford, E. V., Follette, V. M., & Strosahl, K. (1996). Emotional avoidance and behavioral disorders: A functional dimensional approach to diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64, 1152-1168.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1

Imagine the following scenario:

“Lewis has a crippling phobia of spiders. On the day his friends decide to visit the zoo, featuring a new spider exhibit, Lewis immediately decides to avoid the trip. He thoroughly enjoys the company of his friends, and spends most of his free time with them. Nevertheless, he creates a fake story to tell his friends in order to excuse himself from the trip to the zoo.”

Think about Lewis’s perspective. Indicate what you believe is the right answer for each question.

1. How would Lewis feel immediately after making up an excuse to get out of the zoo trip?

Anxious or Relieved

2. Will it be harder or easier for Lewis to avoid another trip to the zoo the next time his friends ask him to come?

Harder or Easier

3. Will Lewis’ decision to avoid the zoo strengthen or relieve his phobia?

Strengthen or Relieve

Step 2

Ask the client to reflect.

What is a situation that you are experiencing that you may be avoiding because it is working for you in the short-term, but really might be harming you in the long-term?

Step 3

Now, think about an emotion that you may be avoiding experiencing, because it feels better in the short-term.

How could this strategy of avoidance be possibly hurting you in the long-term?