

# Recognizing Avoidance

*Avoidance* is what people do to get away from something, whether it's an uncomfortable feeling or a difficult situation. Avoidance can either be helpful or unhelpful, depending on the purpose it serves and the outcome it leads to. For example, avoidance can work well for a short-term problem, where avoiding the issue gives you time to develop a solution. In contrast, if a problem has been going on for a long time, and avoidance just perpetuates it further, then it's probably not the helpful kind.

Use the checklist to identify the types of avoidant behaviors you have engaged in. Then, answer the questions at the end of this worksheet to see how avoidance has impacted you, both the helpful and the unhelpful kind.

## Common Forms of Avoidance

Check the examples of avoidance that you often engage in:

- Staying in bed
- Staying at home
- Avoiding conflict, confrontation, or self-assertion with people
- Worrying, obsessing, or stewing over problems
- Not taking on new challenges or risks
- Avoiding situations that require you to take on responsibility
- Withdrawing from people
- Hiding your true thoughts or feelings from others
- Avoiding situations where you might feel evaluated or judged (e.g., sports, music, exams, job interviews)
- Worrying, over-analyzing, or daydreaming as a distraction from problems that you really need to face
- Seeking reassurance from other people to avoid feeling uncertain
- Putting off difficult decisions
- Thinking about things you need to do instead of doing them
- Complaining about problems in ways that don't lead to solutions
- Using food, drugs, alcohol, or sedatives to numb emotions
- Suppressing emotions or trying to keep from thinking about painful subjects
- Avoiding activities that you used to enjoy
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### When Avoidance Serves a Purpose

Here are a few examples where avoidance is helpful. Check any that you have recently engaged in:

- Emotional avoidance** (e.g., suppressing emotions so you can focus better on a classroom lecture or work project)
- Delay** (e.g., putting off a decision because you need more time)
- Avoiding independence** (e.g., looking to others for reassurance when you are uncertain or need to connect with them for support)
- Avoiding conflict** (e.g., withdrawing from an argument so you can cool down and revisit the issue more thoughtfully)

Think about a time when avoidance worked for you. Describe it with as much specific detail as possible.

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Now, describe a time when avoidance made things worse, using specific details. Even though it didn't work, did the avoidance provide any short-term emotional relief?

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What made these two situations different?

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What are you worried will happen if you reduce avoidance? Are there emotions or problems that will come up? List as many as you can. For example, this can include anxiety, embarrassment, rejection, conflict, failure, or loss.

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Client Worksheet

# Approach Action

Approach is the opposite of avoidance. It moves people toward action and new experiences instead of away from difficulty. The following chart contains a list of common approach actions. For each one, think about a time that you used this action and write an example of what you did in the second column. Use more recent examples when possible, and skip over any that don't apply to you. Finally, use the third column to describe the outcome of your approach action. Did it make things better, worse, a mix, no difference, or are you unsure?

Approach Action	What did you do?	Outcome
Taking direct action		
Asking other people for help or support		
Asserting your opinion		
Taking on risks or uncertainty		
Trying something new to see how it goes		
Making a decision		
Taking on a new responsibility		
Expressing your feelings to other people		
Socializing		
Planning an activity		
Putting a solution into place		
Learning a new skill		
Allowing yourself to experience feelings		
Remembering a difficult or painful event in full detail		
Speaking clearly with eye contact		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		

## Client Worksheet

# Avoidance Makeover

Do you have a list of things you've been avoiding? Whether you've been collecting them through the "Avoidance Scavenger Hunt" worksheet or just storing them up in your head, this exercise will help you make that list more manageable. Start with one item. Choose one that you're really motivated to overcome, or just choose one that's easy to tackle, and write it below.

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What's the main reason you've been avoiding this task? Match that with one of the reasons in the following chart, and try out the solution to the right of that reason. Do you have lots of reasons to avoid it? That's great - then it will match with many solutions, and you can use them all.

Reason to avoid	Solution
It's overwhelming	1. Break it down into smaller steps
I don't know where to start	
It's too complicated	
I don't know how to manage it	2. Practice and prepare
I'm no good at it	
I've never done it before	
I'm afraid I'll mess up	3. Focus on the process, not the outcome
What if I'm embarrassed or look bad?	
I'm worried it won't turn out well	
It makes me too nervous	
It's too difficult	4. Imagine how you'll feel when it's behind you
I don't have it in me	
It's probably not worth the effort	

Now let's look at those four solutions in more detail.

**1. Break it down into smaller steps**

Some tasks are so overwhelming that you don't know where to begin. If that is why you've been avoiding it, bring it into session and we'll break it down into smaller, manageable steps.

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**2. Practice and prepare**

Perhaps you are avoiding because you're out of practice or unprepared for the task. For example, job interviews are difficult for anyone, and most of us don't have much experience with them. You can better prepare by anticipating the questions that may be asked (an internet search helps here) and practicing your answers with a friend or in front of a mirror.

Are there specific ways you could prepare for the task? If the answer is "yes," then put the item on the back burner and focus on practice and preparation until you feel ready to take it on.

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### 3. Focus on the process, not the outcome

Are you avoiding something because you're worried about how it will turn out? In that case, the solution is to focus on the *process* of doing it rather than the outcome. This means accepting the possibility that it won't go well. "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game" or, for the creatively inclined, "It's art for art's sake."

Thoughts like "Am I good enough?... Am I doing it right?... Am I succeeding?" can distract you from actually doing it. Take socializing, for example. It's hard to hold a conversation when you're thinking about how you're coming across. Few outcomes are fully within our control, and being liked is not one of them. Social mingling is full of dead-ends, but if you focus instead on the process of making small talk, then you'll enjoy it more and eventually find the good friends you seek.

Is the task you've been avoiding one that would be easier if you focused on the process? Does anxiety get in the way of doing it? What specifically are you afraid will happen? Is it really as bad as it seems? How realistic or likely is it to happen? Write your answers here.

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Now, imagine doing the task for its own sake. What would that look like?

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#### 4. Imagine how you'll feel when it's behind you

Does lack of motivation keep you from taking it on? Do you dread the negative feelings you'll have when you first start doing it? Instead, imagine how you'll feel when it's done. How will life be different? What opportunities will it open up? Will it clear up some mental space that you've been using up with worry and guilt over the procrastination?

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On the other hand, perhaps you're avoiding it for a good reason. Perhaps this isn't the right time, and life would be worse if you tried to tackle it now. If you think this task is better left undone, write down your rationale here.

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#### Putting it into Action

Have you found a task that you're ready to take on? Use these final two steps to make it happen:

1. Schedule it on your calendar at a specific time and place.
2. Whether it's an ongoing task, like cleaning the kitchen, or a complex one, like building a social life, make it a routine. Set aside a regular time and place to do it each day.

# Turning Avoidance into Approach: Troubleshooting

Avoidance is hard to change. If you have thoughts that get in the way of that change, write them down and bring them to your next session. Some common examples that get in the way are listed below.

**“I’m avoiding because there’s nothing I can do about it.”**

If there’s really nothing to be done, then you may be using healthy avoidance. Trying to fix an unsolvable problem only causes stress and frustration. Instead, work on something else while you put the issue on hold. What if there’s nothing else to work on? Try the steps in “Crisis Survival” on page 120.

**“I avoid things I can’t tolerate. I panic and can’t do it.”**

Make a list of all the feelings that get in the way of doing it. Then, look through the list and circle any feelings that you still have *even when you’re avoiding the task*. How well is avoidance working to keep those negative feelings away? Bring the list to your next session and we’ll look for other ways to manage those intense emotions. Meanwhile, try approaching something that’s easier to tackle.

**“It’s not worth it to change.”**

How has avoidance affected your life and your relationships? How does it affect your self-worth? How much time and mental energy does it suck up? Write your answers down and bring them to your next session.