

Emotional Avoidance Strategies

One way we attempt to control our emotional experiences is through emotional avoidance. Emotional avoidance strategies can become powerful habits that maintain the cycle of emotions. Emotional avoidance is different from EDBs in that they tend to happen *before* an emotion has a chance to occur, whereas EDBs tend to happen *in response* to an emotion that has already been triggered.

Types of emotional avoidance strategies

1. *Subtle behavioral avoidance*

Subtle behavioral avoidance typically happens when a person enters a situation associated with intense emotions, and escape from the situation is not an option, which results in a variety of subtle behaviors of which the person may not be fully aware. Sometimes these behaviors are related to preventing the physical sensations associated with strong emotions. For example, someone who has frequent panic attacks may avoid drinking caffeinated beverages or go to great lengths to avoid perspiring by stripping away clothes or turning the thermostat way down to prevent themselves from experiencing physical sensations that may trigger panic. Other behaviors are related to preventing the possibility of experiencing intense emotions. For example, someone who is anxious in social situations may not answer the phone or avoid eye contact in a social engagement that cannot be escaped and may be emotionally arousing. Someone else might avoid emotional greetings or goodbyes.

2. *Cognitive avoidance strategies*

Cognitive avoidance strategies are often difficult to identify, because we may not even be aware we are using these strategies as emotional avoidance. Some common examples of cognitive avoidance strategies are *distraction* (e.g., reading a book, listening to music, watching television) and *"tuning out"* (e.g., pretending we are not in the situation or not fully engaging in the experience of being in the situation). Distraction might seem useful because it keeps our minds from "running away." But this is also a form of emotional avoidance. For example, someone who worries about the safety of loved ones may watch television or keep busy when loved ones go out at night. The person is fearful that if she does not distract herself and prevent negative thoughts and feelings, they will become overwhelming. Rationalization of problems can also be a form of avoidance (different from the cognitive reappraisal techniques discussed previously), if the rationalization is used as an attempt to "push away" emotions as they happen. For example, a person who worries about getting a bad grade on a paper may desperately try to provide reasons why a bad grade would not matter. This would be an emotional avoidance strategy if it were done with the intention of pushing away or avoiding emotions.

3. *Safety signals*

When someone is unable to directly avoid an emotionally provoking situation, he or she may come to rely on "safety signals" to keep emotions from becoming overwhelming. Safety signals are "talismans," or any items that a person carries that make him/her feel more comfortable, or would be calming in times of extreme distress, despite the lack of any real utility in dealing with a potentially threatening experience. Thus, safety signals have a magical or superstitious quality to them. Common examples of safety signals are water bottles, medication (or empty medication bottles), cell phones, prayer books, pets, etc. Safety signals also prevent us from learning that the situation is not dangerous, as we attribute being able to manage emotions to the presence of the safety signal. Furthermore, the presence of the object reinforces the idea that uncomfortable emotional experiences are unmanageable and overwhelming.

List of Emotional Avoidance Strategies

ID # _____

Module 5

The purpose of this list is to begin to identify subtle ways that you may attempt to avoid uncomfortable emotions. The list will help your therapist watch for these strategies when you engage in emotion exposures, so that the exposures are effective. In the "subtle behavioral avoidance" column, list behaviors that you do that help you feel better when you are experiencing intense emotions. These include taking medication, doing deep breathing exercises, etc. In the "cognitive avoidance strategies" column, list any techniques you use to feel better when you are in a situation you cannot physically escape. Some of these strategies include distracting yourself (by watching t.v. or listening to the radio), "tuning out" of a conversation with another person, or trying to force yourself to think of something other than the situation at hand. Finally, in the "safety signals" column, list anything that you carry with you, or that you do before going out, that makes you feel more comfortable. This could include carrying a water bottle or medication, having your cell phone with you, carrying the names of your doctor or other important people, etc. If you have trouble figuring out what behaviors apply to which columns, that's okay. Just write them down and you will discuss it further with your therapist next session.

Subtle Behavioral Avoidance	Cognitive Avoidance	Safety Signals