

Overcoming Avoidance of Negative Emotions

Objective

To identify the ways you avoid unpleasant or “negative” emotions and find ways to tolerate and accept difficult, thoughts, sensations, feelings and memories.

You Should Know

Social norms sometimes suggest that certain feelings should be avoided. When you were a child, you might have been told, “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about,” “Cheer up. Everyone loses sometimes,” or “I don’t see why you just can’t be happy!” and so on. You might have learned from a very young age that expressing your emotions was not acceptable. Furthermore, threatening messages related to emotions might have contributed to anxiety or depression.

So, from a young age you learned certain emotional experiences were problematic and should be avoided—this belief might have persisted into adulthood, and might manifest as psychological inflexibility. You might even find yourself saying things to make others feel better: “Don’t worry about it, everything will be OK,” “You have nothing to be depressed about—your life is great!” or “Don’t get angry at me—this isn’t my fault.” You might believe certain feelings are negative, and your goal might be to get rid of or avoid those feelings.

According to acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), replacing the word “negative” with “natural” is helpful in experiencing your emotions and feelings in a healthy manner. When “negative feelings or emotions” are perceived as natural, you will relate to them differently instead of avoiding or attempting to control them. ACT discourages avoidance, as it is an attempt to mitigate or evade unwanted feelings or emotions, which can promote making unhealthy choices or acting in self-destructive ways. In addition, it is difficult to move in a values-supported direction and toward meaningful outcomes if you are constantly attempting to avoid unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings. Remember, avoiding your feelings and emotions does not ensure these experiences will go away. In fact, research suggests avoidance exacerbates mental health problems and increases inflexibility.

What to Do

First, complete the following sentences to identify the unpleasant or uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, emotions, and memories you typically might avoid.

The thoughts I’d most like to get rid of are:

The feelings I'd most like to get rid of are:

The sensations I'd most like to get rid of are:

The memories I'd most like to get rid of are:

Next, write a list of everything you have tried to avoid unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or emotions. Try to remember every strategy you have ever used. Review the following list of strategies to remind yourself.

1. Distraction. List everything you have ever done to distract yourself, 'zone out,' or avoid painful thoughts, feelings, sensations, or memories.

2. Opting out. List activities, interests, events, people, or places you have avoided or withdrawn from, including opportunities you have missed out on, because you wanted to avoid feeling bad.

3. Thinking strategies. List different ways of thinking you have tried (deliberately or unintentionally) when unpleasant or difficult feelings arise. Check off any of the following that you have done, and write in any others:

- Worrying
- Dwelling on the past
- Fantasizing about the future
- Imagining escape scenarios (e.g., leaving your job)
- Imagining revenge scenarios
- Imagining suicide scenarios
- Thinking, "It's not fair..." or "If only things had been different..."
- Blaming or judging yourself
- Blaming or judging others or the world
- Talking logically to yourself
- Using positive thinking
- Talking negatively to yourself
- Over-analysis (trying to figure things out)
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Of the ways of thinking you checked off, what are the top two ways you attempt to avoid feelings, memories, or sensations?

1. _____
2. _____

4. Substances. List the substances you have ever used to feel better, including foods, drinks, cigarettes, recreational drugs, and prescription drugs.

5. Anything else. Write down anything else you have tried to avoid your feelings.

Once you have completed your lists, review the strategies and ask yourself the following questions.

Did using these strategies reduce unpleasant or painful thoughts and feelings *in the long term*? Describe.

Did the use of these strategies bring me closer to a happy and meaningful life? Explain.

What did the use of these strategies cost me in terms of time, energy, money, health, relationships, or vitality?

AVOIDANCE DIARY

Complete the following chart at least once/day for one week. Write down unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, emotions, or memories that showed up that day. Next, describe what you did to avoid, get rid of, or reduce them. Then explain what the costs were, and finally, reflect on what you could do differently. The goal is to increase your awareness around the costs of trying to avoid or get rid of painful thoughts and feelings.

Date	Thoughts, feelings, sensations, or memories	What did I do to avoid them?	What did this cost me? (e.g., health, relationships, feeling stuck, time, energy, etc.)	What can I do differently?

Reflections on This Exercise

What obstacles did you encounter while completing this exercise?

After completing the avoidance diary, did you tend to avoid your unpleasant or uncomfortable feelings more or less? Did you come up with ways to manage your feelings differently (other than avoidance)? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
