

When Avoidance Becomes a Coping Pattern



Avoidance coping is a common strategy for dealing with uncomfortable feelings such as stress and anxiety. And in some ways avoidance does work—we change our behavior to avoid the situations that cause discomfort and stress, and temporarily avoid having to deal with those difficult feelings and thoughts. But avoidance coping tends to worsen anxiety over time and doesn't help us solve what is causing the stress in the first place. In fact, avoiding our problems often makes the problems grow. Avoidance coping can also create new problems, such as putting strains on friendships or relationships and causing us to perform poorly at school or in other areas of life.

There are various forms of avoidance coping, such as:

How do I know if a colleague is experiencing a mental health crisis?

Procrastination:

When the deadline for a big project or assignment approaches, we can sometimes keep pushing it off. But rather than lessening our level of stress, we tend to become more stressed the longer we don't face the task. Often, it's all we can think about despite not even having started!

Avoiding Conflict:

Conversations that include elements of conflict and confrontation are often difficult to have, despite being important. While avoiding conversations that can cause conflict or difficult emotions might help us feel better temporarily, these tensions build up over time and can create even more anxiety and conflict.

Avoiding Social Situations:

It's natural to want to avoid situations that make us feel anxious and uncomfortable, whether that's a social gathering or going to the dentist. But the more we avoid situations in order to minimize these feelings of discomfort, the more this becomes a pattern that's hard to break out of. Avoidance coping can stop us from doing what we need to do, and it can also rob us of meaningful and fun events that we might really enjoy.

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Here are some tips for overcoming avoidance coping:

Recognize when you're doing it: Sometimes it's healthy to know our limits and avoid situations that might bring us unwanted stress and difficulty. Avoidance coping becomes a problem when the consequences for avoiding stress are worse than facing the stress itself, or when we stop ourselves from doing what we want to do in the world. Notice when you are procrastinating, avoiding important conversations that might be difficult or uncomfortable, or when you cancel plans because of anxiety. Have compassion for yourself and notice when you are avoiding these things and be honest with yourself about why. It's the first step towards changing your behaviour.

Practice relaxation techniques: Learning to reduce stress and tolerate uncomfortable feelings is an important step. Meditation, exercise, yoga, martial arts, therapy, breathing techniques, and spending time in nature can help reset your nervous system and help you learn to cope with difficult and stressful emotions. Journaling about what's stressing you can also be a great way to express your concerns and brainstorm solutions.

Try Active-Coping: Can you think about the problem in a different light? Changing how you think about the stressor can make it easier to tackle. Then take some time to strategize ways that you can positively affect your situation. Can you create a schedule for yourself to manage your procrastination? Maybe you can practice and learn more about communication skills so you have an easier time resolving conflicts. If there's an event you're nervous to attend, can you ask a friend to join you? Talking through the stressor with those around you can also help you look at the problem in a different way and come up with new solutions.

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Small steps forward: Pushing yourself to tackle everything right away will probably feel overwhelming. Remember that avoidance coping is a pattern of behavior that might take some practice to replace. Try focusing on small steps that you can manage before focusing on some of the bigger actions. A therapist can also help you brainstorm small steps you can take to face the things you've been avoiding, while suggesting healthier coping tools for managing stress.

Most of us avoid situations or tasks from time to time. When avoidance coping becomes our go-to solution for dealing with stress and anxiety, chances are we need to change our behaviors before they get out of control and make our stress even worse. Changing these patterns can take time and feel scary, so taking small steps forward is a great approach. Relaxation techniques such as meditation and exercise can strengthen your resilience and ability to cope with stress, and learning more communication tools can help you approach conflict and navigate stressful situations. Instead of avoiding what's bothering you, try an active approach. How can you think about the situation differently? Maybe there's something small you can do that will improve your situation and give you the confidence you need to face those larger stressors.