

Trauma and Avoidance

Why we avoid after trauma:

Avoidance is a common symptom of PTSD. After a person is hurt, it is natural and adaptive to try to avoid getting hurt again. Avoidance can provide relief from distress and a greater feeling of safety. However, sometimes avoidance can interfere with recovery.

Types of Avoidance:

External/Behavioral – avoiding external reminders of the trauma such as people, places, activities

Internal/Emotional – avoiding unpleasant emotions, thoughts, bodily sensations, and memories. This can include dissociation, which is when a person feels detached from their experience

Possible Forms of Avoidance:

- Watching tv, playing video games, scrolling phone
- Avoiding sleep or oversleeping
- Overworking
- Constantly busy
- Eating, using substances
- Isolating or never wanting to be alone
- Exercising
- Helping others

These aren't all inherently bad. These include enjoyable and meaningful activities. It is sometimes useful to distract as a way to cope. But it is important to examine the degree to which we engage in avoidance. Do we ever allow room for our feelings? Are we avoiding attention to other things that are important?

When is avoidance helpful and when is it harmful?

Adapted from Mindfulness Skills for Trauma and PTSD: Practices for Recovery and Resilience by Rachel Goldsmith Turow (2017)

Unproblematic Avoidance:

- Avoidance that does not interfere with your health, values, goals, or relationships. Also avoidance of situations that could lead to danger or dangerous behaviors.
- Examples: avoiding violent movies, perpetrators of abuse, distraction from self-harm influences

Problematic Avoidance:

- When it compromises health
- Gets in the way of living a full life
- Conflicts with our values
- Prevents us from connecting to other people
- Impedes our ability to recover by reinforcing the fear response/the belief that all triggers are dangerous and intolerable, and prevents us from processing our trauma
- *Examples:* avoiding all relationships, intimacy, social activities, leaving the house

Breaking the Cycle of Avoidance:

Exposure Therapy helps people learn to gradually approach situations, activities, thoughts or memories that have been avoided. This helps us “un-learn” the fear response that perpetuates distress.

Repeated exposure to things that remind us of the trauma (but are safe now) helps reduce the emotional reaction over time. It makes the traumatic memories less distressing and can expand our activities. It can be thought of as “reclaiming” aspects of life.

Picking exposures that are in the “stretch zone” rather than the “panic zone” is important.

How to Begin Approaching:

- Identify the specific fear and areas of avoidance you want to address e.g., grocery shopping, talking on the phone, noticing body sensations, driving on freeway, attending social event, holding hands
- Consider which areas of avoidance (if any) are getting in the way of your goals, values, or quality of life.
- Write a list of situations related to your fear. Rate each situation on a scale of 0-100. Put them in order from least to most distressing. This is called an Exposure Hierarchy
- Start with a situation that is lower on the hierarchy and gradually work up to the more challenging situations. Aim for something that is outside your comfort zone but not in the panic zone.
- Practice approaching /exposing self to this until distress goes down to manageable zone. Ideally, stay with each exposure activity for at least 30 minutes or at least until distress starts going down. Then consider the next step.
- You are in charge. You get to pick what you feel ready to begin working on!

Sample Exposure Hierarchy:

- Driving on the freeway where the accident happened (95)
- Driving on the freeway near where the accident happened (80)
- Driving on the freeway in different city from the accident (75)
- Driving on El Camino several cities long (75)
- Driving on El Camino across two cities (70)
- Driving along side streets (65)
- Driving around neighborhood (65)
- Driving around block (60)
- Sitting in parked car with engine running (40)

Self-Compassion for Avoidance:

“Avoidance is normal, human, and often the wisest choice for stressful situations. We can approach difficult thoughts and feelings in a gentle way and build confidence and comfort in the process.” *Mindfulness Skills for Trauma and PTSD: Practices for Recovery and Resilience* by Rachel Goldsmith Turow (2017)

Ideas for Practice:

- 1) Notice your avoidance behaviors this week, without necessarily any pressure to change them.

2) Identify areas of avoidance that appear to be helpful and areas that might be interfering in your life.

3) Consider one step you are willing to take into your “stretch zone” and experiment with exposing yourself to this three times this week. What do you notice? How does your distress rating (0-100) change over time?

4) Practice self-compassion as you examine the role of avoidance in your life