

Avoidance: What Am I Protecting Myself From?

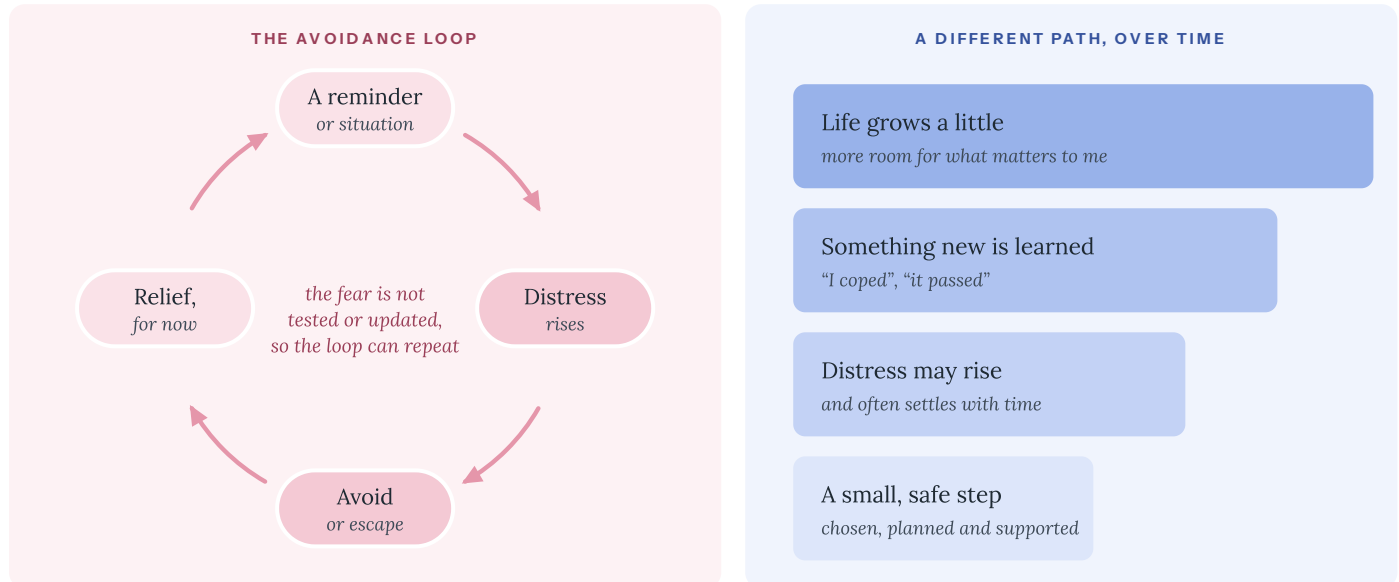
TRAUMA AND RECOVERY · UNDERSTANDING AVOIDANCE

Why we step away from reminders, and what it may cost over time

After frightening or overwhelming experiences, it is very common to stay away from reminders: places, people, conversations, memories or feelings. Avoidance often brings real relief in the moment. Over time, though, it can keep distress going and gradually make life feel smaller. This worksheet helps you look at avoidance with curiosity rather than judgement.

01 How avoidance can keep distress going

a simplified picture



Original diagram informed by cognitive and behavioural models of PTSD (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Steps are best planned with your psychologist, at a pace that feels manageable.

02 Forms avoidance can take

some are easy to miss

Places and situations

- Places linked with what happened
- Certain people, crowds or events
- News, films or conversations
- Dates or anniversaries
- Sounds, smells or sensations

Inner experiences

- Pushing memories or thoughts away
- Shutting down feelings
- Avoiding bodily sensations
- Not talking about it, even when helpful
- Staying away from sleep or dreams

Quieter forms

- Keeping constantly busy
- Alcohol, substances or numbing
- Staying on guard, or near an exit
- Going, but only with a “safety” routine
- Checking or reassurance-seeking

03 Holding this with compassion

Avoidance makes sense

It is a natural way of trying to stay safe and reduce distress. Noticing it is not a criticism of how you have coped.

Not all avoidance is a problem

Staying away from genuine danger, or from people who have caused harm, is sensible. This worksheet focuses on avoidance of reminders that are not dangerous in themselves.

Change is gradual

Moving towards what has been avoided usually happens in small, planned steps, with support, and at a pace you agree with your psychologist.

What the research suggests

EVIDENCE NOTE

Avoidance is one of the core symptom clusters of PTSD, and cognitive models suggest it can prevent frightening memories and beliefs from being updated, helping distress to persist (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). More broadly, efforts to avoid unwanted thoughts, feelings and memories have been linked with a range of difficulties (Hayes et al., 1996).

Trauma-focused CBT approaches, such as cognitive processing therapy, cognitive therapy for PTSD and prolonged exposure, are recommended treatments for PTSD, and each works with avoidance in its own way (NICE, 2018; Resick et al., 2024). This worksheet is informed by these approaches but is not a treatment in itself.

Avoidance: What Am I Protecting Myself From?

REFLECTIVE WORKSHEET · UNDERSTANDING MY AVOIDANCE

Looking at one pattern of avoidance, gently and without judgement

Choose one thing you tend to avoid and work through the questions below. Short notes are fine, and you can stop at any point.

i Before you begin: you do not need to write about the traumatic experience itself, and you do not need to choose your most difficult area of avoidance. A smaller, everyday example is a good place to start. If your distress increases, you can stop, use a grounding skill, and return to this another time, or with your psychologist.

04 Understanding my avoidance

questions 1 to 3

1 What am I avoiding?

Tick any that apply, then describe it in your own words

☐ A place
 ☐ A person or group
 ☐ A conversation
 ☐ An activity
 ☐ A memory or thought
 ☐ A feeling
 ☐ A sensation
 ☐ Other

How much do I avoid this? ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 0 = not at all · 10 = completely

2 What happens immediately when I avoid it?

What do I notice in my body, feelings and thoughts, straight away?

How much relief do I usually feel? ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 0 = none · 10 = a lot

3 What does avoidance protect me from right now?

For example, a wave of fear, a painful memory, feeling out of control, shame or being judged

It can help to acknowledge this: "It makes sense that I have tried to protect myself from this."

If I didn't avoid it, what do I fear might happen?

Write this as a prediction, which may or may not turn out to be true

How strongly do I believe this right now? ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 0 = not at all · 10 = completely

Avoidance: What Am I Protecting Myself From?

REFLECTIVE WORKSHEET · COSTS AND SMALL STEPS

Weighing what avoidance costs, and imagining a small, safe step

There is no pressure to change anything today. These questions are about noticing, and imagining a first step for when you are ready.

05 Looking at the longer term questions 4 and 5

4 What does it cost me over time?

Tick any that apply

- ☐ Time with people I care about
 ☐ Work or study
 ☐ Sleep
 ☐ Activities I used to enjoy
 ☐ Confidence
 ☐ Independence
 ☐ Health appointments
 ☐ Feeling like myself

5 What would a small, safe step toward life look like?

Something small, specific and manageable, not overwhelming

My small step: _____

If this feels too big, a smaller version could be: _____

When and where: _____

Support that might help: _____

How manageable does it feel? ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 0 = not at all · 10 = very

- ☐ This step is physically safe
 ☐ I have discussed it, or will, with my psychologist
 ☐ It feels challenging but manageable
 ☐ I know how I will look after myself afterwards

If I try the step: what happened, and what did I learn?

For example, what I expected, what actually happened, and how I coped

06 Looking back

How distressed I felt before this worksheet ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 after ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

What stood out for me?

To bring to my next session

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE

Writing about difficult experiences can bring up emotions. You can pause, stop, choose a different prompt, or return to the exercise later. If you become significantly distressed, consider speaking with your psychologist or another appropriate professional.

SOURCES

Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M. (2000). A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38(4), 319–345. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(99\)00123-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(99)00123-0)

Hayes, S. C., Wilson, K. G., Gifford, E. V., Follette, V. M., & Strosahl, K. (1996). Experiential avoidance and behavioral disorders: A functional dimensional approach to diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64(6), 1152–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.64.6.1152>

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2018). *Post-traumatic stress disorder* (NICE Guideline NG116). <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng116>

Resick, P. A., Monson, C. M., & Chard, K. M. (2024). *Cognitive processing therapy for PTSD: A comprehensive therapist manual* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.