

# Stop Avoiding What You Fear

## Objective

To increase awareness of how and when you avoid things you fear and develop healthier responses.

## What to Know

You might do things to avoid things you fear, preventing you from experiencing intense, unwanted, or painful emotions. While avoidance may lower your distress in the short run, over the long run, avoidance can make things worse. The ways in which you avoid things probably varies, and may look different depending on the circumstances.

Sometimes it will be obvious when you avoid something you fear, but you may also do less obvious things. Cognitive avoidance involves strategies you may do to avoid having to think about, remember, or pay attention to something you fear; these strategies include distraction, rumination, or forcing yourself to think of something other than the situation at hand.

Engaging in any kind of avoidance prevents you from recognizing the situation is not dangerous and reinforces the idea that uncomfortable or scary experiences are overwhelming and intolerable.

## What to Do

There are many ways in which you may try to avoid things you fear. For instance, you might completely avoid situations that trigger fear. You might also try to avoid your feelings when you are already in a situation you cannot physically escape.

Describe something you fear. Be specific.

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Check off the following activities you engage in to avoid what you fear; be as honest as possible.

- Binge-watching television or streaming movies.
- Playing video games.
- Spending excessive time on social media.
- Drinking alcohol, misusing prescription medication, abusing illegal drugs, or smoking cigarettes.
- Turning off your phone or avoiding friends or family members.
- Overexercising.
- Worrying over and over again about something you cannot control.

- Cutting or harming yourself.
- Abruptly leaving to avoid a conversation.
- Lying about how you feel.
- Skipping work or school.
- Sleeping too much or staying in bed.
- Binge eating or overeating.
- Frequently complaining.
- Blaming others or refusing to take responsibility.
- Berating yourself or engaging in excessive self-criticism.
- Overspending.

Review the items you checked off and write down the two things you do the most to avoid things you fear:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Now, think of what you can do instead of avoiding what you fear. Be as specific as possible.

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Describe a recent situation where you avoided rather than faced and embraced your fear. This could be related to work, a relationship, or an area of your life where things are not going well. For instance, perhaps you pretended to feel sick at work to avoid a meeting with your boss.

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As you bring this situation to mind, reflect on (1) what emotions it brought up, (2) what you did to prevent yourself from feeling these emotions, and (3) how effective you were in avoiding fear. Describe below.

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Now, for the next two weeks, fill in the following chart. Each time you encounter something you fear, write down the date and describe the situation. Describe the emotions you experience and what you did in response. If you avoided what you fear, write down what you could have done differently.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Emotion(s) you experience</b>	<b>What did you do?</b>	<b>What could you have done differently?</b>

Date	Situation	Emotion(s) you experience	What did you do?	What could you have done differently?

**Reflections on This Exercise**

What was it like to complete this exercise?

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Can you see any patterns in the type of avoidance strategies you use? For instance, do you commonly distract yourself by scrolling through social media feeds, or turn to food or other substances? Be specific.

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What did you find most challenging about this exercise?

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Did you develop healthier responses to feared situations? Why or why not?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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