



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Getting more out of life

CBT Tools

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What is avoidance?

There are many different examples of avoidance. In short, when we feel down or stressed it is easy to avoid doing anything about our problems in the hope that they will somehow go away. **THEY WON'T!**

In the short-term, avoiding problems may give us some breathing space and time to think, but in the long-term it only makes things worse. You have to face up to problems in your life. Facing up to stress will be hard in the short term, but in the long run it will greatly help you to control your stress. Avoiding problems is not a failing or something you should criticise yourself for. Everyone does it from time to time. It's when we avoid things for too long that it becomes a problem. Avoiding facing fears can also lead to people developing phobias.

The vicious cycle

You may have given up things that previously gave you a sense of pleasure and achievement. For example, you may have stopped reading, or going out. By removing these things from your life, your mood can worsen as a result.

It can sometimes feel as though everything is too much effort and reduced activity may result. Low mood is a vicious circle. It slows you down mentally and physically. It makes everything an effort. You tire easily. You do less, and blame yourself for doing less. You come to believe you can do nothing and that you'll never get out the bit. This makes you feel more down and it then it becomes even more difficult to do anything... and so the vicious cycle goes on.

Finding hidden problems

Check that your stress is not trying to tell you that there is something wrong in your life. Check to see if you need to face up to any problems at this stage. These problems could include:

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Relationships | Sexual |
| Children | Parents |
| Friends | Work |
| Money | Being stubborn |
| Immaturity | Being too dependent |
| Drink or drugs | Gambling |
| Being obsessive | Being a perfectionist |

Not everyone who feels stressed has a hidden problem. However, you should check to see if there are any in your life. Examples might be:

- Your partner is drinking and treating you badly
- You are being bullied at work
- You are in a lot of debt
- You need to patch up a quarrel with a family member
- You need to be more open with a family member

There may not be an easy answer to hidden problems, but you must at least look for one. If you don't face up to them, they will keep your stress alive.

Unhelpful coping strategies

Before you learn new ways to get on top of stress, think of ways to get rid of the things that might be making you worse. These may include:

Alcohol

Many people with drink problems start down that road by using drink to calm their nerves. If you drink to cope with stress, you may start to depend on it. If you can't go to certain places or do certain things unless you have a drink before hand, you are storing up trouble. Symptoms such as nausea, sweating and shaking may be related to alcohol. Drinking too much can affect your sleep and make you more prone to stress the next day. Panic may be related to drinking. Heavy drinking makes stress worse.

Looking for a 'miracle cure'

It does not exist. Stress often takes a long time to build up, so it is not going to clear up overnight. No-one else can control your stress. To get on top of stress takes a great deal of hard work on *your* part. So the answer lies within you. Although some treatments can be relaxing at the time, such as acupuncture or aromatherapy, they are not teaching you how to control stress or get on top of it. *You* must learn to control the problems yourself.

Reassurance

This may be nice in the short term, but you can become dependent on it. If you ask people at home or at work for reassurance a lot, they will quickly get fed up with you. This can lead to friction and, hence, more stress. You have to feel strong enough to supply your own answers.

Trying to spend your way out

Treating yourself is fine. However, frequently overdoing it when you're stressed isn't going to take the stress away. In fact, it could leave you with a whole new set of problems, such as debt! Practical changes, such as avoiding carrying too much money with you when you shop, leaving your credit cards at home, and limiting your spending may help. You could also plan what you are going to buy in advance so there are no impulse buys.

Self-criticism

If people under stress have one great skill, it is this. Criticising yourself doesn't help. If things go wrong, accept them. Learn from your mistakes and then move on. You have to learn to pat yourself on the back every time you try to combat your stress. This will help increase your self-confidence.

Withdrawing from people

Probably the worst thing you can do is withdraw from others. We all need someone to talk to. It helps us to offload, unwind and even see things differently. When people are stressed and low they tend to think the worst. This is called negative thinking. Not only do they think the worst about themselves, they also tend to think the worst about other people and can think the world is against them. When we feel low we tend to embrace the negative and ignore the positive. You may even consider yourself worthless and burdensome to friends and relatives. Often people find that others don't have the same negative opinion as they do of themselves. You may also find that you are overestimating

how others cope and underestimating how you cope. But you won't know this unless you speak to others.

START TALKING!

Talking

If you bottle up your feelings, you are building up pressure inside yourself. Talking to a trusted friend or loved-one can allow you to release this tension. They may not even have realised you felt so stressed and may be able to give you good advice that you have not thought of yourself. Get your worries off your chest!

How to alter your behaviour

Goal setting

You may have tried all sorts of previous attempts to change, but unless you have a clear plan and stick to it, change will be difficult. Planning and selecting which behaviours to try to change first is a crucial part of successfully moving forwards. By beginning to alter your actions, you are beginning to break the vicious cycle that keeps your difficulties going.

To begin with, it is important that you decide which behaviours *you want to try to change*. This could include behaviours you have stopped (e.g., socialising, shopping, hobbies and so on, due to anxious avoidance or reduced activity). These can also include unhelpful behaviours that you feel are keeping your problems alive (e.g., using illegal drugs, spending too much, and so on).

My goals worksheet

Take some time to complete the worksheet.

- Make sure you set yourself defined, realistic and clear goals.
- Once you know what behaviours you want to change, you can make yourself daily goals to work towards.
- If you are avoiding certain situations and want to face them you could list them.
- Be as specific as you can.
- Then rate each one in terms of how much anxiety you anticipate feeling on a scale 0-10, with 0 = No anxiety and 10 = Severe anxiety.
- It is best to start with the activity you find least anxiety provoking first of all and practise it as much as you can.
- If practice is to be helpful it must be regular, frequent and prolonged.
- Keep practising until the anxiety has died down.
- If something feels too hard look at ways of breaking down into more manageable steps.
- Don't be put off by feeling anxious. Remember you are learning to master anxiety rather than avoid it.
- Don't forget to reward yourself for taking a step forward!

Goals worksheet

| Goal | Anxiety rating 0 - 10 |
|-------------|----------------------------------|
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Being less avoidant - how to activate yourself

If you are feeling low becoming more active is one way to break the vicious circle. Activity makes you feel better. If nothing else, it takes your mind off your worries and negative thoughts. It gives you a sense that you are taking control of your life again, and achieving something worthwhile. You may even find there are things you enjoy, once you try them. Activity makes you feel less tired. Normally when you are tired you need to rest. When your mood is low the opposite is true: You need to do more. Doing nothing will only make you feel more lethargic and exhausted. Activity motivates you to do more. The more you do, the more you feel like doing. Activity improves your ability to think. Problems, which appeared overwhelming, come into perspective and people who care about you will probably be pleased to see you doing more.

Activity is also helpful for reducing anxiety. When we are anxious our bodies can feel full of nervous energy and you may feel agitated unable to sit at peace. Being active can burn off this nervous energy and can makes us feel more relaxed.

Doing too much

Sometimes when people are stressed they may find themselves doing too much and always being “on the go”. It may be the case that you are doing too much and need to slow down. Filling out the Activity schedule, at the end of the handout, will let you see just how much you are doing. You could then use the sheet to see what you can cut out. You may be overdoing it. Often when people are stressed they keep busy to *avoid* thinking about what’s really worrying them.

It is important then to ask yourself:

- Do I really need to be doing all of this?
- What enjoyment am I getting out of it?
- Am I cleaning too much?
- Can I replace certain activities with something I enjoy?

- Am I being too much of a perfectionist?

Steps to help you to break the vicious cycle

Take things one step at a time. For the first week, record exactly what you do hour-by-hour on the activity schedule. After you have recorded each activity give it a rating of either E or C: E stands for 'Enjoy' and C stands for 'Coped with'. This will let you see how much time you are spending on things that you enjoy and can cope with. Keeping a diary like this can show you that maybe you need to be doing more things that you enjoy. Doing more things you enjoy could help to improve your mood and your confidence.

What social or creative activities could be useful and enjoyable for you to try out? They don't have to be expensive. Here are some suggestions:

Visit a friend Telephone a friend
Be with grandchildren
Read a book or magazine
Paint a picture
Go for a walk
Relax in a nice warm bath
Put on some make up, do your hair.

Write down your own suggestions:

Practical hints to help you on your way

- Set aside a particular time each evening to record what you have done during the day and plan for tomorrow. Try to choose a time when you are not likely to be interrupted, and where there are no other pressing demands on you.
- You can use relaxation techniques before you start an activity to help you to feel less anxious.
- Give yourself encouragement. Start the day with an activity that you can *cope with* and *enjoy*. It will get your day off to a good start!
- Stick to the pattern of activities that you found rewarding and enjoyable in the past. There is a good chance that once you get going, you will find it so again.
- If you are going somewhere, aim to go for just half an hour or an hour. Take each step one at a time. You could take someone with you the first few times you go for support.
- Avoid bed. Beds are for sleeping in, not for retreating to during the day. If you need to relax during the day, then plan to achieve it in another way. For instance, do some breathing exercises, listen to relaxing music or read.

- Reward yourself for what you have done. You might, for instance, set aside time for a nice bath once you have completed an hour of a particular activity.
- Most of all watch, out for negative thoughts, such as, "I won't enjoy it", "I'll only make a mess of it", "It will be too difficult", and so on. These thoughts could block you from taking action.

Positive self-talk

Positive self-talk is used to help people through anxiety provoking situations and can take the form of saying positive things to yourself before you go into a situation like "I can do this". It can help you to prepare for situations, to cope in situations and, if all goes well, you can even use it to give yourself praise. Going out more may feel difficult if you are out of the way of it, but saying encouraging comments to yourself can be really helpful and just give you that extra boost you need. Examples of positive self-talk are provided below.

Preparation boosts

"It's not going to be as bad as I think."

"It won't last long and I can cope."

"If I do get bad feelings, I know they won't last long and I can cope with them."

"It's better to go than not to go. Worry doesn't help."

"I'm getting better and need to re-build my confidence."

Comments to help you cope in situations

"Concentrate on what is going on, not how I feel."

"I know I am going to be OK."

"The feeling always pass. They are temporary."

"One step at a time."

"Anxious feelings are unpleasant, but not harmful or dangerous."

"I can tolerate my anxiety; I've managed it many times before."

Comments to give yourself praise

"I coped with that."

"I achieved that; I'm getting better."

"I handled that; it should be easier next time."

"I can be pleased with the progress I'm making."

"I did that well."

"If I keep this up I'm going to get really good at this."

Even if things don't go according to plan, you should still congratulate yourself for trying. Don't be too hard on yourself if things don't go well. Remember when your mood is low this can affect your ability to look at the positives.

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Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of mental health problems.

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