

12 Ways We Avoid Difficult Feelings

- 1 **Voluntary Avoidance:** When it feels like difficult feelings are too hard to handle or perhaps too shameful, we may simply avoid them. The best way to heal is to take a chance and share them with another person in a context of safety and empathic connection. Usually, our dread is worse than the actual experience.
- 2 **Schemas:** These are early non-verbal behavior patterns (including attachment style) learned instinctively to gain comfort and avoid pain. Examples might be automatic behavior that kills intimacy or attacking when feeling threatened.
- 3 **Dissociation:** The ability to wall off parts of experience from consciousness awareness or convert emotional distress into physical experience.
- 4 **Reenactment:** Helplessness and powerlessness are among the most painful feelings known. Repeating an experience under our own volition counters the feeling of being “done to,” even when the reenactment is self-harming. Gaining control seems to be the main motivation, perhaps along with the vain hope of a different outcome.
- 5 **Inborn Avoidance Mechanisms:** Anxiety, depression, obsessing and OCD rituals are symptoms that can function to distance from overwhelming feelings. These patterns may also involve individual biology and genetic heritage. Even so, the mind is capable of using them to avoid difficult feelings. Depression can represent anger turned inward. Anxiety can be a way to avoid things we are really afraid of. Rituals dodge anxiety and obsessions substitute for what we can't control.
- 6 **Arrested Development:** We grow and develop by trying new things. Avoidance of scary or uncomfortable new experiences is a way to avoid pain, but also results in maturational arrest.
- 7 **Acting Out:** Includes acting on feelings so as to bypass feeling them. Also, acting in accordance with dysfunctional thoughts and values can reinforce them.
- 8 **Distorted Thoughts:** Irrational and unreasonable thoughts are often mixed in with our more logical ones. Denial, minimization, projection are some of the traditional “defenses,” driven by a need to distance from uncomfortable inner knowledge. Thoughts that rationalize unhealthy behaviors and feelings are the “automatic thoughts” targeted by cognitive therapy.
- 9 **Distorted Values:** The conscience uses shame and guilt to steer our free will according to internalized rules or values. Unhealthy values and attitudes towards the self can be internalized from those who have hurt us. Inappropriate shame and guilt can lead to self-neglect and self-harm. Reshaping distorted values is difficult because our conscience is designed to resist temptation to “compromise our standards.”
- 10 **Hidden Agendas:** Irrational behaviors can secretly be motivated by a wish to influence others. i.e. self defeating behavior to arouse attention and pity; inability to forgive while secretly waiting for the other to acknowledge wrongdoing.
- 11 **Guilty Quests:** Five-year-olds gain a grasp of time future, permitting “someday” solutions to today's problems. Wishes to achieve “illicit” ambitions and pleasures may run counter to the conscience. Such guilty quests are suppressed from awareness but drive behavior. This is the classic subject matter of psychoanalysis.
- 12 **Addictions:** Compulsive behaviors can aim at masking pain and filling the emptiness of unmet needs through substitutes that are never enough. Addictions may have a biological component.