

How to Stop Avoiding What Scares or Overwhelms You

By MARGARITA TARTAKOVSKY, M.S.
Associate Editor



Regardless of whether you struggle with anxiety, you probably avoid all sorts of things. We all do. These can include painful feelings; difficult conversations; bills and big projects; or situations where we might be judged or rejected.

We avoid these things for all sorts of reasons, according to Melanie A. Greenberg, Ph.D, a clinical psychologist in Marin County, Calif., who specializes in managing stress, mood and relationships. It can be because we're scared or anxious; because we don't feel competent or don't know where to start; or because the problem feels too big.

It's an unconscious habit that worked in childhood when we didn't have the skills or power to change the situation, Greenberg said. (For instance, as a teen you hung out with your friends instead of trying to set limits at home with a critical parent, she said.)

However, when we avoid something today, we don't give ourselves the opportunity to learn new skills or solve problems, Greenberg said.

We don't learn that we can tolerate discomfort, said Sheri Van Dijk, MSW, a psychotherapist in Sharon, Ontario, Canada. We "train our brain that this is <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/03/28/how-to-stop-avoiding-what-scaries-or-overwhelms-you/>

something we *should* be fearful of ... and that we are [incapable] of getting through the difficult situation.”

Avoidance also can create new problems, such as addictive behaviors, Greenberg said. And the more we avoid something, the more anxious and fearful we become.

So how can you stop avoiding that scary or overwhelming thing you’ve been avoiding?

Here’s a list of tips to try.

Separate it into smaller steps.

After dividing the problem into feasible parts, work through the easiest steps first, said Greenberg, author of the forthcoming book *The Stress-Proof Brain*. She shared this example: You’re avoiding looking for a new job. You break down this big task into “getting your resume updated, identifying and contacting references, researching the jobs you want, talking to people you know who work in the industry, etc.”

Access your inner wisdom.

Van Dijk, author of *Calming the Emotional Storm*, described our inner wisdom (or “wise self” or “true self”) as the little voice that says “don’t say that, you’re going to ‘regret it later’ when you’re feeling like lashing out at someone.” Or it says “slow down, you’re going to get a ticket’ when you’re anxious because you’re late for work.”

Our inner wisdom considers the consequences and what’ll be most helpful in the long term, she said. It doesn’t discount emotions or put them in charge. Instead, it takes into account your emotions, logical thinking and intuition.

So when you’re avoiding something, check in with yourself to see if you’re relying purely on emotions or logical thinking.

Practice mindfulness.

“Mindfulness is about being in the present moment, with your full attention, and with acceptance,” Van Dijk said. How does this end avoidance?

As she explained, when you’re focused on what’s happening *right now*, you notice the urge to avoid a situation and your accompanying emotions (such as anxiety). Instead of judging the experience, you accept it, which is the opposite of avoidance.

“If you’re avoiding something, you’re not accepting it, you’re rejecting the possibility of having the experience for whatever reason.”

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/03/28/how-to-stop-avoiding-what-scares-or-overwhelms-you/>

Of course, not judging our experience is really hard. As Van Dijk said, "it's what the human brain does." But we can *practice* acceptance.

Acceptance involves two parts: recognizing when you're judging something; and working toward using more accepting language, Van Dijk said. That is, identify the facts surrounding the situation and your feelings about it, she said.

She shared this example: Instead of saying, "This stinks" when you don't get a promotion at work, you say, "I'm disappointed and frustrated, but there's nothing I can do about it. What can I do so I have a chance next time?"

In other words, acceptance isn't about dismissing your thoughts or feelings. It's about expressing them — out loud or to yourself — in a nonjudgmental way, Van Dijk said.

Be accountable to yourself or others.

For instance, you're trying to face your bank account and budget better, so you record the money you're spending and what you're spending it on, Greenberg said. Or you tell a friend that you'll update them every day on an overwhelming project at work. Or you support each other in getting taxes organized.

Decide that it's OK to be uncomfortable for what you want.

For instance, "If you're socially anxious, [make] a decision to go to a party and speak to two new people even if that feels scary," said Greenberg. If you're dreading your credit card bill, open the envelope, because you've decided to straighten out your finances. If you're anxious about having a hard conversation with your spouse, bring it up gently because you know it's an important topic.

Seek support.

According to Greenberg "Seek support if you don't have the skills or knowledge you need." That support might include seeing a therapist, reading a book, taking a class or talking to a friend who has experience dealing with similar situations.

As a whole, avoidance isn't healthy. But in some cases it can be. It depends on whether you're letting your emotions rule or you're accessing your inner wisdom.

Van Dijk shared this example: You have a friend who leads a very chaotic life. Any time you're with her, you get caught up in her drama and your mood sinks. Lately, when you think about spending time with her, you get anxious. You decide that the healthiest choice is not to see her (i.e., to avoid her). Instead of letting your anxiety rule, you make a wise choice that honors your well-being (i.e., access your inner wisdom).

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/03/28/how-to-stop-avoiding-what-scares-or-overwhelms-you/>

However, if you're thinking, "Oh god, I can't stand the thought of seeing her today, I can't do it, I'm going to text her telling her I'm sick," then you're *reacting* from your emotion and letting it control you, she said.

When navigating avoidance, the key is to check in with yourself and make a choice that genuinely serves you and contributes to your well-being, both right now and in the long run.