



FACE YOUR FEARS

DID YOU KNOW?

It's human nature to try to avoid what we fear. That's because avoidance usually helps us feel better - but only for a little while.

AVOIDANCE

Avoidance can take many different shapes and forms, including:

- Restricting where we go
- Limiting what we do
- Procrastinating
- Avoiding talking about certain topics
- Trying to suppress our thoughts
- Distracting ourselves in unhealthy ways
- Blunting anxiety by using alcohol, cannabis, or benzodiazepines (Valium, Xanax, Ativan, or Klonopin)

SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Safety behaviours are a subtle form of avoidance. They are ways of reassuring ourselves in scary situations. For example:

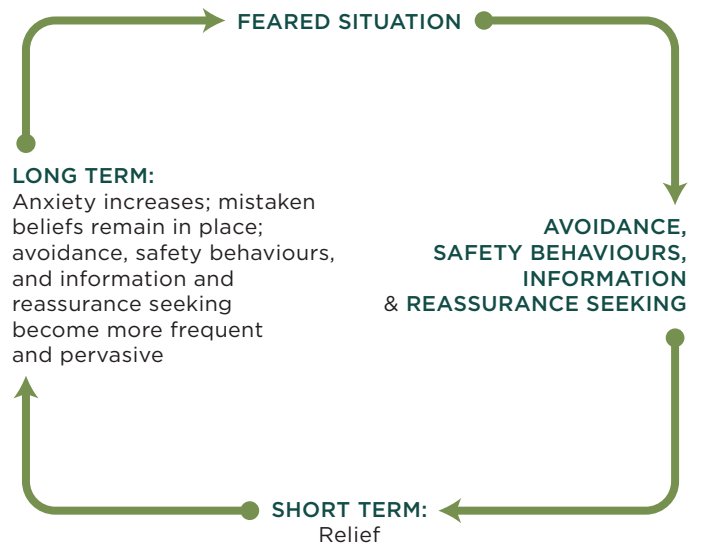
- Carrying anti-anxiety pills whenever leaving home, just in case of a panic attack.
- Going to social events only if accompanied by a friend.

REASSURANCE AND INFORMATION SEEKING

Reassurance and information seeking are other types of avoidance. In these cases, we are attempting to eliminate or reduce our anxiety by reducing our uncertainty. For example:

- Calling a loved one several times throughout the day to check on their safety or well-being.
- Frequently checking vital signs (e.g. heart rate, blood pressure, temperature) to ensure they are within a normal range.
- Spending hours and hours searching online about stressful topics (e.g. early signs of cancer, what to do in case of being attacked, which neighbourhood is best to live)
- Asking for numerous people's opinions before making a decision, for fear of getting it wrong.

Do you recognize any of these examples as ways that you cope with stress or anxiety? Write them here!



Although avoidance helps us feel better in the moment, it causes us to feel worse longer term. This is because avoidance prevents us from fully experiencing the situation and learning what we fear isn't dangerous or a threat. As a result, we continue to expect the worst and experience anxiety in that situation. We also miss out on experiences that create a rich and meaningful life.

What are some ways that avoidance interferes with your interests and life goals? Write them here!

To illustrate, imagine a person who avoids driving in busy traffic because he thinks he will experience intense anxiety and crash his car. Because he plans diligently to avoid congested traffic, he avoids the anxiety related to confronting this scary situation. As time progresses, his convictions strengthen and he becomes increasingly unwilling to drive in any traffic situation that might get congested. He continues to believe that it is dangerous to do so, and moreover that he could not handle feeling so anxious. He never gives himself a chance to disconfirm his catastrophic predictions. Over time, his anxiety gradually increases and generalizes. Eventually he is unwilling to drive or even take public transportation, and he spends most days restricted to his home.

TECHNIQUES FOR FACING YOUR FEARS

Behavioural techniques are powerful methods for reducing anxiety. A few key techniques are summarized below.

ELIMINATE THE SAFETY NET

A good place to start is to eliminate safety behaviours. That's because safety behaviours stop us from directly facing our fears. Imagine a person who insists on carrying pepper spray with them at all times, just in case they are attacked by a dog. As long as the person continues to carry the pepper spray, they have not faced head-on their fear of being attacked. As a result, their anxiety will continue to be a problem. Eliminating safety behaviours first helps us get ready to take the next steps of doing therapeutic exposure and running behavioral experiments. It also allows us to experience new things. For example, by dropping the safety net and going to a social event without a friend, someone with social anxiety might meet new people and build confidence as a result.

The following two techniques - therapeutic exposure and behavioural experiments - require careful planning to be effective. We recommend that you seek professional assistance or more detailed guidance before undertaking either of these.

DO THERAPEUTIC EXPOSURE

Therapeutic exposure is a methodical process of gradually and repeatedly going into feared situations until we feel less anxious. It's easiest to start with situations that are less scary. For example, imagine a person who is afraid of snakes. They might start their exposure by looking at photos of snakes. They would keep looking at photos until they felt significantly less anxious while doing so. At that point, they would move to the next step, for example, watching videos of snakes. They would continue in this fashion, moving gradually from step to step, until they were able to successfully overcome their fear of snakes.

RUN BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENTS

Behavioural experiments are structured to test the accuracy of our anxiety-related beliefs and assumptions, which are frequently inaccurate. We state our hypothesis and then conduct an experiment (or several) to see what happens. For example, imagine a person who believes that their job security hinges on making sure their work emails are free from spelling mistakes. They might decide to deliberately insert spelling errors into five messages over a 2-week period. By doing so they are testing their prediction that their supervisor will mention at least one of these errors and advise them to be more careful.

ANXIETY RESOURCES AVAILABLE THROUGH TALL TREE

Tall Tree offers a range of services to help people with anxiety. Our exceptional team of mental health professionals offer one-time workshops, group courses, and 1-on-1 therapy. We also offer yoga, meditation, nature-based therapy, personal training, and nutrition coaching.

If you aren't sure where to start, connect with our intake coordinator who will provide guidance, clarification, and a conversation about what might work best for you. You can contact our coordinator by phone at **(250) 978-0789** or email mentalhealth@talltreehealth.ca.