

Avoidance - What's Below the Iceberg?

Looking beyond 'won't' to understand fear, overload, uncertainty and protection

Avoidance is visible. The reason for it often is not. Underneath can be anxiety, fear of judgement, overwhelm, perfectionism, low confidence, sensory distress, past experiences, emotional pain, unmet needs or a strong need to regain safety and control.

What is avoidance?

Avoidance means moving away from, delaying or reducing contact with something that feels difficult, threatening, painful or overwhelming. It can involve places, people, conversations, tasks, sensations, memories, decisions or emotions. Avoidance is not automatically unhealthy: sometimes leaving or saying no is protective and appropriate. The important question is whether avoidance is protecting us from genuine harm or increasingly restricting a life we want to live.

What people might see

Cancelling; procrastinating; not replying; changing the subject; staying at home; repeatedly delaying appointments; avoiding particular foods or environments; refusing a task; excessive preparation; reassurance-seeking; handing decisions to someone else; appearing uninterested; or saying 'I can't' when the person cannot yet explain why.

What may be underneath

Fear of judgement	Being criticised, embarrassed, rejected or misunderstood may feel more threatening than the task itself.
Anxiety and worry	Avoidance can quickly reduce anxiety, which makes the urge to avoid more powerful next time.
Past experiences	Bullying, trauma, humiliation, failure or previous overwhelm can shape expectations of what will happen again.
Feeling overwhelmed	The task may contain too many steps, decisions, sensations or unknowns to process at once.
Low confidence	Past difficulty can create a belief that trying will expose inadequacy or end in failure.
Need for control	Avoidance can restore a sense of choice when demands or uncertainty feel unmanageable.
Emotional pain	Grief, shame, sadness or conflict may sit beneath an apparently practical refusal.
Perfectionism	If something must be done perfectly, starting can feel riskier than postponing it.
Sensory overload	The environment itself may be painful or exhausting rather than merely disliked.
Unmet needs / safety	Rest, clarity, autonomy, adjustment, predictability or support may be needed before engagement is possible.

The avoidance cycle

Avoidance often works extremely well in the short term. A feared task appears, anxiety rises, the person avoids it, and anxiety falls. The brain can then learn: 'I felt better because I escaped.' The next encounter may therefore feel even more threatening. Over time, life can become organised around preventing anxiety rather than pursuing what matters.

Short-term relief, long-term cost

Repeated avoidance can increase unfinished tasks, missed opportunities, relationship strain, isolation and reduced confidence. It can also prevent the nervous system from discovering that some feared situations are manageable. But this model should never be used to pressure somebody into genuinely unsafe, inaccessible or sensory-painful situations.

ADHD, executive function and task avoidance

What looks like avoidance may involve task initiation, working memory, time perception, prioritisation or difficulty breaking a vague task into steps. A person may care deeply about doing something while feeling unable to begin. Making the first action concrete and small can be more useful than increasing pressure.

Autism, demand and sensory factors

For autistic people, avoidance can be connected with uncertainty, sensory distress, communication demands, previous overwhelm or a strong need for autonomy. Some people also describe intense distress around perceived demands. Rather than assuming defiance, ask which part of the situation creates the greatest load and whether the demand can be made clearer, safer or more collaborative.

Trauma-related avoidance

Avoiding reminders can be a protective response after trauma. A sound, place, conversation or sensation may activate threat responses even when the person logically knows they are currently safe. Trauma-focused work should be appropriately paced; forcing disclosure or exposure can be counterproductive.

Perfectionism: avoiding the possibility of getting it wrong

Perfectionism can create an impossible entry requirement: 'I must know exactly what to do before I start.' Delaying then protects against judgement temporarily. A useful alternative is to define what 'good enough for this stage' looks like and permit a first attempt to be incomplete.

When avoidance is actually a boundary

Not every 'no' needs to be overcome. Avoidance language is sometimes applied to people who are protecting themselves from unreasonable workload, discrimination, unsafe relationships, inaccessible environments or sensory pain. Before trying to reduce avoidance, ask whether the situation itself needs changing.

Your avoidance iceberg - reflection

Choose one situation you have been avoiding. Explore it without criticising yourself for the response.

What can others see?	What might be underneath?
What do I predict will happen?	What happens in my body?
What do I genuinely need?	What is one manageable next step?

Make the next step smaller

Instead of 'do the whole task', identify the smallest useful action: open the email; find the phone number; put the document on the desk; visit the building without going inside; write three words; stay for five minutes; ask for written instructions. A small step is not cheating. It creates information and can build confidence without overwhelming the nervous system.

A gentle approach plan

- 1. Name the situation.** What am I avoiding?
- 2. Separate danger from discomfort.** Is this unsafe, inaccessible, painful, or mainly anxiety-provoking?
- 3. Identify the hidden load.** Which part feels hardest?
- 4. Add support.** What adjustment, person, information or sensory change would help?
- 5. Choose a small step.** Make it specific and achievable.
- 6. Review.** What actually happened compared with what I predicted?

Supporting somebody who is avoiding

Curiosity is more useful than accusation. 'What part feels hardest?' often gives better information than 'Why won't you do it?' Avoid taking over every task, but do help make invisible steps visible. Offer choice, clarity and realistic support. Where anxiety is maintaining avoidance, encourage gradual engagement without turning support into pressure or shame.

When reassurance becomes part of the cycle

Repeated reassurance can temporarily lower fear but sometimes leave the person needing reassurance again. It may be more helpful to validate the anxiety and then return to a plan: 'I know this feels uncertain. What is the next step we agreed you could manage?'

Moving forward without forcing

The goal is not to eliminate every form of avoidance. It is to increase choice. We want to be able to step away because something is wrong for us, and to step towards something important even when anxiety is present.

Build confidence through evidence

Confidence often follows action rather than arriving before it. Keep a record of small things you approached, what you predicted, what actually happened and what helped. This creates a personal evidence base that is more convincing than simply telling yourself not to worry.

Use adjustments, not just willpower

Written instructions, quieter environments, predictable timings, body doubling, visual plans, transport support, advance information, shorter appointments, breaks and alternative communication can remove unnecessary barriers. The aim is not to make every challenge easy; it is to stop preventable barriers consuming the capacity needed for the challenge itself.

A message from Maggie

If people call you avoidant, they may only be seeing the part above the water. They may not see the fear, sensory overload, shame, memories, uncertainty or sheer number of steps underneath. Understanding those things does not mean you have to stay stuck. It gives you a kinder and more accurate place to start. Ask yourself whether you need safety, an adjustment, more information, recovery time or one very small step forward. You do not have to leap into the thing you fear to prove that you are trying. Sometimes progress begins with understanding why your whole system has been saying 'not yet'.

Books and further reading

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley. CBT-based understanding of anxiety and avoidance.

The ACT Workbook for Anxiety and Depression - Michael Sinclair and Matthew Beadman. Practical acceptance and values-based exercises.

Unmasking Autism - Devon Price. Useful context around masking, autistic experience and environmental fit.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith. Accessible psychological tools for difficult emotions and everyday challenges.

Sources and professional context

This guide is psychoeducational and draws on established cognitive-behavioural models of anxiety and avoidance, trauma-informed principles, executive-function understanding and neurodiversity-affirming practice. Professional sources for further information include NICE guidance relevant to anxiety disorders and PTSD, NHS anxiety resources, and National Autistic Society information on sensory differences and anxiety.

When to seek additional help

Professional support may be useful when avoidance is significantly restricting work, education, relationships, healthcare, eating, leaving home or other important areas of life. New or severe symptoms should be assessed appropriately, particularly where physical health, trauma or another condition may be involved. Seek urgent support if there is immediate risk to safety.

Space to Breathe Therapy
Understanding creates change.