

ANXIETY & AVOIDANCE

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WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ANXIETY & AVOIDANCE?

Have you ever touched a hot stove? I bet that you immediately pulled your hand back and vowed never do it again. Seems like a great plan, right? You managed to avoid future injury by learning through trial-and-error.

So, what does this example have to do with anxiety? When we encounter a situation or thing that makes us feel anxious, it triggers our fight-flight-freeze-fawn response, sending a signal to us that we are under threat.¹ When this happens, we are often flooded with a number of extremely uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. In order to avoid feeling anxious and uncomfortable again, we tend to use the same tactic as we do with the hot stove - we avoid the situation or thing so we do not have to experience the unpleasantness again.

In theory this is a great solution: avoid the situation or thing and never have to experience anxiety again; however, research suggests that doing so is a temporary solution and in most cases increases anxiety over time.² Let's take a look at how this works with The Anxiety Cycle below.

THE ANXIETY CYCLE

Let's say you have to write a final exam. Last time you wrote an exam your mind went blank. You started to feel tightness in your chest, your heart started beating fast, and you felt like you might pass out. You also became flooded with a whole bunch of worried thoughts, like: "what if I fail this exam?"

This undoubtedly is a scary and uncomfortable experience. So, your first instinct is to avoid feeling this way again by no longer showing up to write any future exams. Problem solved right?!

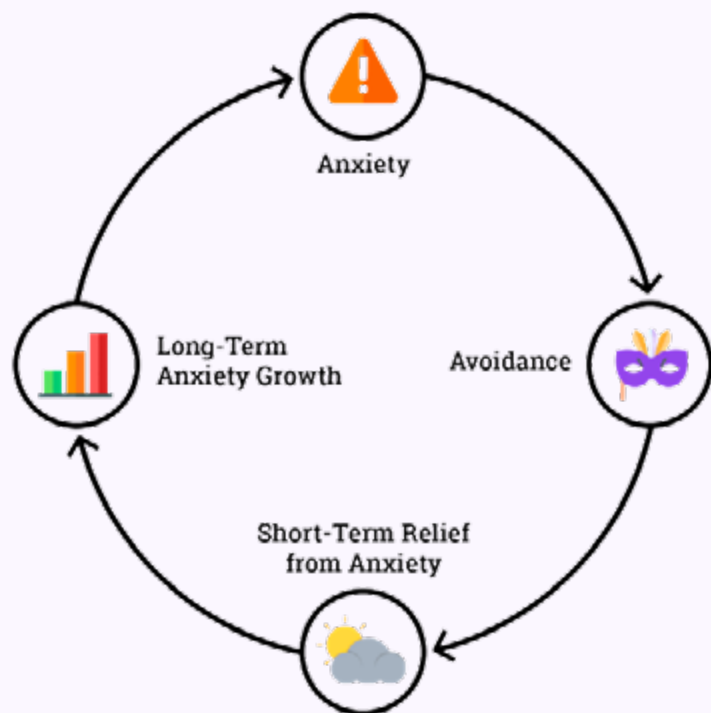


Diagram: The Anxiety Cycle from therapistaid.com³

THE ANXIETY CYCLE (Continued)

Research suggests that your anxiety may be temporarily relieved when you avoid such anxiety-inducing situations, but it is only temporary.² In fact, the next time you go to write an exam, your anxiety levels are likely to be even higher.² Not to mention that skipping all of your class assessments is likely to really hurt your academic career. Needless to say, avoidance is not the answer.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO COMBAT AVOIDANCE

- Remind yourself that it is okay to experience anxiety. Even though it is an uncomfortable feeling, it is not dangerous and will be over soon.⁴
- Remind yourself that it is possible to experience anxiety AND still complete a task. For example, it is possible to experience anxiety AND successfully speak in public.
- Challenge yourself to do things that make you feel anxious through exposure.⁵ It is helpful to start by completing a lower anxiety-inducing task and gradually working your way up to higher anxiety-inducing tasks. You can create your own exposure ladder here.
- Lastly, determine how willing you are to experience anxiety by considering the value of the potential outcome.⁶ For example, how willing am I to experience anxiety while travelling if it means that I get to go to Europe on vacation with my friends?



For more information,
check out
www.pineappletherapy.ca

References

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- ³ Therapist Aid (2021). The Cycle of Anxiety (Worksheet). Therapist Aid. <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/cycle-of-anxiety>
- ⁴ Fletcher, J. (2021). *Anxiety: Practical about panic: A practical guide to understanding and overcoming anxiety disorder*. John Murray Learning.
- ⁵ Abramowitz, J. S., Deacon, B. J., & Whiteside, S. P. (2019). *Exposure therapy for anxiety: Principles and practice*. Guilford Publications.
- ⁶ Eifert, G.H. & Forsyth, J.P. (2005). *Acceptance and commitment therapy for anxiety disorders: a practitioner's treatment guide to using mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based behavior change strategies*. New Harbinger Publications.