



AVOIDANCE: WHEN PROTECTION STARTS SHRINKING MY LIFE

DISTINGUISH SAFETY FROM AVOIDANCE

Avoidance can reduce distress in the short term. The question is whether it protects you from real danger or increasingly limits the life you want.

AVOIDANCE CAN BE PROTECTIVE

- Avoiding an unsafe person, dangerous place, discriminatory setting, or credible threat can be wise.
- Boundaries, blocking, leaving, documentation, and safety planning are not automatically unhealthy avoidance.
- Do not use exposure exercises to override real danger.

WHEN AVOIDANCE COSTS MORE

- You stop activities, places, people, emotions, or memories mainly because they remind you of trauma.
- Short-term relief is followed by more isolation, fear, unfinished responsibilities, or loss of meaningful activities.
- Your world becomes smaller even when the present situation is reasonably safe.

ASK TWO QUESTIONS

- What am I protecting myself from?
- Is the danger current, likely, and observable - or is my body responding to a reminder of past danger?
- What information would help me tell the difference?

CHOOSE A MANAGEABLE STEP

- If the situation is safe enough, choose a small step rather than forcing the hardest one first.
- Stay within your capacity and use support, accommodations, transportation, or a trusted companion when helpful.
- Notice what you learn from the experience.

VALUES CAN GUIDE DIRECTION

- What has avoidance taken me away from: family, culture, faith/spirituality, community, nature, work, learning, creativity, or independence?
- Choose reconnection because it matters to you - not because someone says you should 'get over it.'

GET MORE SUPPORT WHEN NEEDED

- Trauma-focused treatment can help when avoidance is overwhelming.
- Substance use, overworking, isolation, or constant distraction can also function as avoidance.
- Seek individualized help when avoidance is severe, unsafe, or significantly limiting daily life.

Protection and recovery are not opposites. The goal is safer freedom - not forcing yourself into danger.

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Sources: VA National Center for PTSD: Avoidance; Negative Coping and PTSD; PTSD Treatment Basics.