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Avoidance vs. Exposure

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Whenever we encounter a situation or a problem that evokes intense negative emotions and intrusive thoughts, we strive to avoid it. The simple truth is - no one likes to feel bad. So, when we become aware of the situations and events we fear, the only thing left to do is come up with a plan on how to avoid it.

Avoiding unpleasant situations may seem like a brilliant idea. If you avoid it, you don't have to deal with it, and you, therefore, don't have to experience any unpleasantness. However, avoidance usually comes at a high long-term price. Avoiding certain situations, feelings, and thoughts, may lead us to avoid life and all the experiences that can make us grow and improve, as well as those events which could contribute to our happiness.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center, with the text "EXPLORABLE" in a large, white, sans-serif font and "Quiz Time!" in a smaller, white, cursive font below it. Below the logo are three quiz cards, each with a white border and a white background. The first card shows a pair of red roller skates on a wooden floor, with the text "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" below it. The second card shows a fan of colorful pencils, with the text "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2" below it. The third card shows a Ferris wheel at sunset, with the text "Quiz: Flags in Europe" below it. In the bottom right corner of the banner, there is a white link that says "See all quizzes =>".

A Natural Response to Fear

When we are in danger, our minds make a decision whether to fight or flight. You probably recall the story, from the beginning of the course, that was about encountering a bear in the woods, and what a normal reaction to that situation would look like. In similar circumstances, your brain quickly evaluates the danger and determines if you can fight off the danger, or if you should run. Whenever we are faced with a physical threat, that may cost us our lives; we tend to exhibit a quick, instinctive reaction, which helps us stay alive.

Escaping Is Not a Solution

Nonetheless, can we place a sign of equivalence between a charging bear and speaking in front of an audience? Not quite. In situations similar to public speaking, your life isn't in danger, but you feel discomfort caused by anxiety. Your struggle may be accompanied by thoughts, such as "Oh, my God, I can't do this". Escaping may then seem like a reasonable plan. However, as you have probably already hypothesized, it is neither reasonable nor adaptive.

Avoidance Leads to More Avoidance

Avoiding experiences that may lead us to unpleasant feelings and thoughts is known as experiential avoidance. It usually starts with avoiding situations we find uncomfortable or potentially embarrassing. For example, you may start by avoiding classes that involve public speaking, while trying to convince yourself that you don't need to learn all of that anyway. It may start out innocently, but the more you avoid, the faster and larger your negative feelings grow. The result? You start to avoid an increasingly large spectrum of events. You can probably see how similar behavior is not in compliance with facing your fear or anxiety, but is rather about running away from it.

Avoiding Thoughts and Emotions

Furthermore, avoiding thoughts and emotions is difficult, because we cannot consciously choose how to feel and think. So, you are putting a lot of effort and investing valuable energy into avoiding emotions, thoughts, and events. As you do that, you send signals to our brain, indicating that there is, indeed, something objectively threatening that you need to run from, and so you fool it into creating a vicious cycle. Without realizing or wanting it, you may feed fear and anxiety with the energy and time you put into avoidance.

Forms of Experiential Avoidance

Experiential avoidance doesn't refer only to avoiding situations that provoke negative emotions and thoughts. There are many different forms of this phenomenon. For example, having to drink a glass of wine, before you give a toast at someone's wedding, is experiential avoidance, since you avoid your fear, by using alcohol as a crutch. Other common forms of experiential avoidance include:

- Missing out on important opportunities, because they require significant effort, as well as leaving your comfort zone.
- Avoiding certain social situations in which you may have to speak in front of other people, especially if you don't know them.
- Not changing anything in your environment or yourself, because of the fear that you'll only make it worse (for example, staying in a bad relationship because you're afraid of

loneliness).

- Not allowing other people to get to know you well because you'll then feel vulnerable.

Avoidance as a Lifestyle

If you have already managed to avoid public speaking, then you know many creative ways for doing that. For example, choosing classes that don't require public presentations, or placing yourself in a team role, where you clearly demonstrate that you will not be doing any of the presenting. Besides, you might have learned that if you don't successfully avoid the role of a public speaker before the event, you can always come up with a plan B - you can "get sick", "be stuck in traffic" or "have a family emergency".

Exposing Instead of Avoiding

The only proven way to cope with the fear of public speaking and have long-lasting results is exposure. You may not like to hear this, but whatever other techniques you apply, they would simply never work, unless you expose yourself to public speaking. It is unrealistic to expect that reading about coping with your anxiety, on its own, would do much good. The real trick is to do enough exposure, as hard as that may be at first.

How Does Exposure Help?

Exposure to situations that evoke negative emotions and thoughts allows our brains to reevaluate the experience of anxiety. Once your brain has faced public speaking a few times and you have not reinforced your anxiety by running away from it, the brain will learn how not to trigger a reaction of fear. That will happen because it would become obvious that there's no real danger. As you see, exposure isn't about getting used to fear. Quite on the contrary - it is training your brain to respond calmly. With techniques such as identifying and disputing your cognitive distortions, imagery, mindfulness, acceptance, setting value-based goals, you are already on the right path.

Seek Out Exposure

It may be difficult to expose yourself to as many public speaking situations as you'd want because you don't often get a chance to perform in front of an audience. However, if you channel your creativity into exposure, rather than avoidance, you will find that there are plenty of ways to seek out public speaking. For example, you can approach a group of people in a café and ask them for directions, or you can tell a joke at a party in front of others. As you can see, speaking in front of others can become a regular part of your daily life. Waiting for the next opportunity to at school or work won't help, you have to seek out event, where you can speak in front of an audience if you hope to reach any real results.

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