

Avoidant Personality Styles: Hiding from What You Need the Most

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“I’m sorry, I must be going,” Dave muttered after only being at the party for a half hour. His hesitant excitement had quickly turned to anxiety when all he could think about was whether he had worn the right clothes, why more people had not said, “Hi,” and who he would play games with that evening. As he felt himself becoming more and more nervous, Dave was sure that all eyes were upon him. Leaving seemed like his only option.

From across the room, Julie, the party hostess, saw Dave looking upset as he left. “Why is he leaving so soon?” she asked her husband, Steve. Seeing the distressed look on her face, and sensing the fear behind Julie’s questions, Steve answered, “I don’t know, but I’m sure it’s nothing you did.”

Julie wasn’t convinced. She thought it must have been something she had forgotten or the fact that she had not greeted Dave. Concluding that Dave thought the party wasn’t much fun, Julie spent much of the evening in the kitchen, complaining of a headache. Confused by Dave’s early departure and frustrated by Julie’s all-too-typical reaction, Steve simply shrugged his shoulders and began mingling with the guests.

Have you known someone like Dave who goes to social events or strikes up conversations, only to seem nervous, walk away quickly, or act like they would rather be some other place? Or have you often had these reactions around people yourself? What you may have noticed or experienced could be the struggles of someone with an avoidant personality style.

The Avoidant Personality Style

Don’t most of us experience some anxiety in relationships? Haven’t we all had some reservations or fears about certain people or social situations similar to those of our partygoer, Dave? Yes, but most of our fears don’t result in the profound social inhibitions and severe feelings of inadequacy that haunted Dave.

Try for a moment to put yourself in the shoes of someone who is extremely ill at ease in social situations. Imagine waking up in the morning and working hard to muster up the small amount of optimism that is buried beneath your social anxiety. But when you finally do come to a situation when you interact with people, it happens again. You are convinced they are thinking critical thoughts about you or that you have done something socially inappropriate or awkward. You are certain that you do not belong here. Maybe it’s true, you think to yourself – I don’t have what it takes to be accepted or liked by other people.

To make matters worse, the ways you behave to avoid being rejected and criticized actually elicit the very responses from others that seem to validate your worst fears. You shrink back within yourself, unsure of whom to blame – yourself or the seemingly critical, rejecting, or condemning people with whom you come into contact every day. After a while, this pattern pervades your life. You long to feel socially acceptable and experience friendship and intimacy, but the painful self-consciousness you feel in the presence of others makes it easier to merely avoid them. You may be unwilling to be involved with people unless you are certain they will like you. And you approach potentially intimate relationships with restraint or a deep fear of being shamed or ridiculed. Inhibited by feelings of inadequacy or of not measuring up, you are preoccupied with thoughts of criticism or rejection.

Some people struggling with an avoidant personality style clearly display their social anxiety and emotional anguish, and simply withdraw. Others mask their fears. They may let you into what seems to be a close friendship (or even a committed relationship like marriage) as long as you pass an initial, stringent loyalty and acceptance test. But when you inevitably break their unrealistic standards for a safe relationship, your avoidant friend erupts in disdainful contempt or withdraws in hurt and anger.

Other avoidant personalities try to cope with painful feelings of rejection by clinging rigidly to some belief or ideal. They try to find the sense of security or worth that is lacking in their relationships by obsessively propounding and defending some particular philosophical, political, or religious perspective.

Still other avoidant personalities develop rigid and intense family loyalties. Even though their fear of relationship may have initially developed because of rejection, ridicule, or conditional love within their family, they maintain the fantasy that eventually they will be accepted and approved by their family members. But the picture they hold of their family is usually more of a wish than a reality. A deep sense of caring with emotional and spiritual sensitivity is not there. In its place are superficial loyalties or outward appearances of togetherness.

To try to manage their fears, some avoidant personalities become highly sensitive and aware of everyone's needs but their own. Others deal with their anxiety by writing incredible poetry, creating beautiful pieces of artwork, or busying themselves in solitary pursuits. By working alone they develop amazing talents in activities that help them deal with their interpersonal anxieties. Others initially appear quite happy around people or desirous of the attention of others. But anything that seems to hint of rejection quickly triggers their deep anxiety.

Remember Julie? She hosted a lively and well-organized party, convinced that she would be able to relax and have fun this time. With a smile on her face and a shaky optimism in her heart, Julie greeted the guests, watching closely as the activities unfolded.

Unfortunately, Julie's efforts to give the perfect party in order to push away her fears were unrealistic. Perfect parties, perfect hosts, and perfect guests do not exist! When Dave left the party, it snapped Julie's fragile optimism and any hopes of feeling good about herself. Both she and Dave were avoidant, but in different ways. Julie threw a party, hoping to be liked and receive approval; Dave forced himself to go. But things didn't work out well for either of them.

You may wonder, Why does someone like Dave, who so fears relating to people, go to a party in the first place? Good question. The answer is an important thing to remember about people with avoidant personality styles. As fearful as they are of being rejected, they still deeply desire friendships and social contacts.

When efforts to cope with anxiety about being negatively evaluated become so pervasive that they seriously impact several areas of life, an avoidant person may be diagnosed with Avoidant Personality Disorder. This is seen in only 0.5 – 1.0 percent of the general population, equally divided among men and women, and needs to be diagnosed and treated by a professional.

To be professionally diagnosed as having Avoidant Personality Disorder, a person must have a pattern of relating that begins no later than early adulthood and be characterized by at least four of the following:¹

- Avoids occupational activities that involve significant social contact because of the fear of being rejected, criticized, or disapproved
- Avoids getting involved with others unless they are certain of being liked
- Consistently afraid to become involved in intimate relationships
- Preoccupied with being criticized or rejected in social settings
- Inhibited in new social settings because of feelings of inadequacy
- Views oneself as socially unappealing, inept, or inferior
- Consistently reluctant to take risks or try new activities because of the fear of being embarrassed, criticized, or ridiculed

In this article we refer to an avoidant personality *style* rather than the technical term, Avoidant Personality Disorder. Many people who do not meet at least four of the formal diagnostic criteria above have pervasive avoidant styles that still cause them and those near them much grief.

The Inner Life of the Avoidant Personality

The inner experience of avoidant persons is characterized by a hyper-alertness to how they feel and how they fit in their relational world. They are extremely sensitive to the moods and feelings of others and to any hint of disapproval. A brief grimace on the face of a friend may be taken personally as a sign of disapproval.

Such hypersensitivity not only applies to external stimuli but to internal stimuli as well. Fleeting thoughts can become ruminations. A tinge of emotion can be transformed into a flood of despair. A common physical sensation may be translated as abnormal. Phobias may spring forth from everyday relational anxieties and experiences. What others experience as minor stresses are compounded and may even result in psychosomatic symptoms, like Julie's headache in the opening vignette. A pattern of withdrawal and even "self-desertion" may emerge. Attempts to ignore one's internal conflicts are followed by relational struggles that further reveal these very conflicts – a frustrating and potentially depressing cycle.

Since people with avoidant personalities have difficulty experiencing intimacy, they may come to believe that emotional closeness and caring love, particularly unconditional love, do not exist. Their hypervigilance leads them to pay attention to every negative experience and to miss the positive ones that make life so gratifying and pleasurable. All of their relationships are likely to be experienced as

difficult, even their relationship with God. No matter how hard they try to believe that God loves them, they have continuous doubts and always expect his disapproval.

Does an avoidant person fear all types of relationships equally? Yes and no. In one sense, the avoidant person has learned to be anxious about all types of relationships. No one is excluded as a potential source of hurt. But most avoidant personalities also find one or a few people with whom they get along better than others. In time, problems often emerge, unfortunately, even in those relationships.

The Roots of Relational Avoidance

God designed each of us for meaningful mutual relationships. Ours is the wonderful opportunity to relate to God, family, friends, and others. The core of our identity is lived out in our relationship with our Creator and with people. We share our deepest feelings and our joys and struggles with true friends. That is part of being fully human. The Apostle Paul loved the Christians in Corinth so much that he felt distress and anguish for them (2 Cor. 2:1-4). He goes as far as to say, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:26, New International Version). Sharing meaningful emotional relationships is one of the richest experiences in life. It is the way God made us.

Unfortunately, living in a sinful world brings a myriad of potential problems into our relationships. We misunderstand each other. We blame others for our problems, and we become preoccupied with ourselves. Some of us become extremely angry, condemning, controlling, or critical. Others lose control of their lives through drugs and alcohol, and some are physically or mentally abusive. All of these styles can cause deep pain during a child's impressionable, formative years.

When children are repeatedly emotionally bruised or ignored, their hope of ever having safe, encouraging, nurturing connections is snuffed out by their constant fear of hurt, criticism, or rejection. Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." Avoidant people live with little or no hope that love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, patience, kindness, and forgiveness can ever be theirs. This despair makes them emotionally vulnerable. Once the heart despairs of ever experiencing safe intimacy, it is difficult to believe that another person can ever meet one's needs. The safest recourse seems to be avoidance.

People develop avoidant personality traits due to a variety of influences. They were likely born with a certain biological predisposition towards introversion, hyperirritability, fearfulness, or sensitivity. They may have grown up in a family that was in some way abusive (sometimes severely so), neglectful, rejecting, or highly critical, competitive, or shaming. Some combination of these family dynamics, as well as their inborn temperament, caused them to become excessively self-critical, sensitive to rejection, and socially anxious. Siblings and peers may also have unknowingly contributed to the development of their self-rejecting, critical way of thinking about themselves. Eventually, a vulnerable self-concept emerges and continues to be reinforced by subsequent relationships, experiences, and self-perceptions.

An avoidant personality nearly always begins in early childhood. It often starts as profound shyness, fear of social situations, or lack of friendships. In adolescence, this trait becomes clearer as the social and emotional struggles of the teenage years take center stage. By adulthood, the characteristics of an avoidant personality are generally well established.

How Can I Help Someone With An Avoidant Personality Style?

Being in relationship with persons with an avoidant personality can be frustrating and confusing. You want to be emotionally connected and engage in the normal range of human interactions. But they are socially and emotionally like turtles that repeatedly pull into their shells at inappropriate moments. You get occasional glimpses of their real selves – just enough to get your hopes up – only to see them retreat into their shells again.

Efforts to relate to a friend or relative like this can seem fruitless or never-ending. You may feel the easiest thing to do is to give up and allow the person to withdraw. After all, isn't that what the avoidant person wants from you? But remember, the person with the avoidant personality style is conflicted at this point. He or she wants to be left alone (for safety) and wants to be in a relationship!

Some withdrawn, shy, avoidant people will struggle with their feelings for an entire lifetime. But many others grow and change. A combination of their own motivation, the support and acceptance of family and friends, an experience of God's unconditional love, and participation in good therapy can bring about major growth. Even then, however, we should not expect an avoidant person to turn into the life of the party! And the process will take time. Those who have avoided deep personal involvement for years out of fear will not be able to suddenly drop their defenses and invite you in with open arms.

Instead, expect them to alternate between hope and fear, to inch toward you one minute and retreat the next. Helping them takes a great deal of patience, sensitivity, and time. But if you place yourself in their emotional shoes and sense the fears they feel, you may be able to gradually help them take steps to diminish their fears.

Let's take a look at some specific suggestions for helping an avoidant person.

The first step is to help avoidant persons feel as safe as possible with you. Their pain and danger radar are exceptionally strong. Since any hint of criticism, ridicule, or rejection can trigger their withdrawal, it is crucial to accept them just as they are. If you have too strong of a desire to change them, you won't be helpful. Avoidant people will sense that you want them to change for your reasons, and they won't feel safe and understood. Avoidant people must know that you want to help them for them, not for you. Only then can they feel safe enough to open up. The Bible puts it well when it says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment" (1 John 4:18). As long as avoidant people are afraid that you will criticize, judge, complain, or punish, they will not feel safe enough to open up. It will take much patient love to overcome their fear.

Second, ask questions that show your sincere interest in their life. At first you may ask the usual questions about the weather, work, and their day. But as your relationship grows, you can gradually become more personal and ask questions about their ideas and feelings. In time, you may get to the hurts and fears that first led them to start avoiding meaningful relationships with others.

Third, disclose things about yourself, including your own struggles and weaknesses. Honest self-disclosure promotes a sense of togetherness and safety and encourages reciprocal sharing.

Fourth, once you reach a level of honest mutual sharing, you may need to lovingly confront one of the avoidant behaviors or the exaggeration of disapproval received from others. Empathize with their pain and reasons for acting or seeing things the way they do. Then kindly point out the problems these reactions are causing. Continue to show that you still accept them even if there is no change. You are

simply trying to help by observing something they do that actually interferes with what they really want in life. You aren't being critical or condemning. You are trying to be helpful.

Fifth, take it slowly. If either you or the avoidant person discloses too much too quickly, things can backfire. An idealized, intimate relationship may become so attractive that the avoidant person jumps in with both feet only to become disillusioned and withdraw again the moment things don't fit the fantasized image of a perfect, close relationship. Consistent love and caring, along with an occasional misunderstanding that is talked through and resolved, lay a much better foundation for lasting trust than a quick, idealized relationship.

Sixth, commit the entire relationship to prayer. Try not to become discouraged about what may appear to be a lack of return for your efforts. God is even more interested in helping your friend than you are!

Finally, one of the most important things you can do is to encourage your avoidant friend to get professional counseling. You may not have the skills, time, or desire to help a friend with a longstanding pattern of avoidance. Your pastor may know a good Christian therapist. Or you can do some research to identify the names of reputable therapists. Don't expect that all counselors will have the expertise to work with avoidant personality issues, since counselors have various specialties and experiences. Try to find someone with a special gift in relating to people who have a habit of avoiding meaningful relationships.

A good time to suggest that a therapist could be helpful is when your friend seems most open or most frustrated by his or her anxiety. Gently explain why you believe this. Expect some defensiveness, hesitancy, denial, or even a strong display of emotion. But if you have made it this far and you are fairly certain of the individual's need for therapy, your assertiveness in recommending treatment may be the best way to show your concern.

What If I Have an Avoidant Personality Style?

First, if you keep seeing yourself in these pages, be assured that help is available. You do not have to continue living with such strong self-criticism and fears of ridicule, disapproval, or hurt. You can work through the causes of your painful relational feelings and become comfortable around others. The starting point is to know that you can. Others have done it. So can you.

The second step is to find a safe relationship. Identify a friend or counselor with whom you feel a reasonable measure of safety and comfort. You won't feel totally safe, of course, because that's the nature of your problem. But some people are basically very kind, well adjusted, accepting, and nonjudgmental, and will tend to put you at ease. That is the type of person with whom you need to begin sharing your struggles.

Third, be prepared to face the painful childhood experiences that lie at the root of your tendency to be extremely shy and sensitive. While it is probably most beneficial to do this with a professional counselor, you may be able to find a good friend who can help you on this journey. This can be a frightening step, but it is immensely relieving to find that you are not alone and that someone can come alongside you in a way that no one did when you were growing up. The Bible says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

Fourth, don't expect perfection from your psychotherapist or your friend. They will not perfectly

understand you all the time. And you don't need them to. What you need is someone who is consistently sensitive, understanding, patient, and nonjudgmental, not someone who is perfect. In fact, part of your growth will probably come by learning that a slight misunderstanding or a temporary preoccupation are just that – slight or temporary – and not signs of deep disapproval or rejection.

Fifth, expect to work through a variety of intense emotions. People who continually avoid situations need to come to grips with their social anxiety. But they also frequently have other hidden painful feelings like shame, depression, confusion, anger, abandonment, or resentment. Only as you work through those longstanding emotions will you develop the freedom to feel good about yourself and comfortable with others, and to perceive social situations realistically.

Therapy with a sensitive Christian psychologist or counselor can provide a safe environment that gradually helps you “come out of hiding” and experience authentic acceptance. Although your counseling probably needs to start individually in order to help you feel safe, in time it may be helpful to involve a spouse, family members, or even a friend. Some people find group therapy helpful once they have established a safe relationship with a counselor and made some initial progress.

Several forms of individual therapy have proven effective in treating the avoidant personality. The most successful approaches tend to utilize all or a combination of the following:

- A genuinely supportive and sensitive relationship
- Empathy for the withdrawn person's emotional pain and relational frustrations
- Trust building
- Expression of feelings
- Exploration of childhood relationships, dynamics, and feelings that led to the avoidant style
- Increased understanding of oneself, others, and relationships
- Learning to challenge automatic negative thoughts and false ways of viewing life
- Replacement of habitually negative thoughts with more realistic assessments of oneself and others
- Behavioral interventions to practice new ways of relating and manage self-critical thoughts
- Development of a strong identity as a completely forgiven, accepted child of God through Jesus Christ as Savior

The goals for therapy include increasing self-esteem and confidence in relationships, and working toward a decreased sensitivity to the perceived criticism of others. For example, if our partygoer Dave were to enter therapy, his counselor might first spend time supporting him in his struggles, empathizing with how hard it must be, and earning Dave's trust. The therapist would be able to hear both Dave's desires to have meaningful relationships and his intense fear of being criticized, rejected, or humiliated. The therapist would truly understand the pain of Dave's dilemma. If Dave stays to himself, he is isolated and alone. But if he tries to get involved with people, he is sure he will make a fool of himself or be rejected, ignored, or embarrassed. Either way, he loses. This is the dilemma of the avoidant person, and only a therapist who understands this dilemma at a deep emotional level can help him.

As Dave begins to feel understood and safe, he can begin to explore the underlying causes of his intense social fears and investigate how and why he has equated mild disapproval with rejection, and rejection with devastation. He needs to recall and re-experience the painful patterns that led to his withdrawal. As a child, Dave may have had no option except to withdraw or to fight. But as an adult, he can find much better ways of managing and resolving his fears and pains.

With a foundation of safety and acceptance, the therapist can gradually begin to sensitively challenge Dave's distorted thoughts, such as the idea that all eyes are on him when he goes to a party. Dave can learn why he tends to read in criticism when it isn't there, and learn to challenge his exaggerated perceptions of others' disapproval. If Dave joins a counseling group with others who have similar avoidant struggles, he may see and hear in others what he may not be able to see and hear in himself. Dave might also join in a family group or have some counseling with his spouse, if he is married. This would provide him with relational experiences and insights with those closest to him.

In terms of the length of treatment, the current trend of brief therapy may be somewhat helpful in alleviating some avoidant personality issues, especially if family and friends are willing to participate and support Dave in his therapy. But due to the deeply embedded nature of personality characteristics and the avoidant person's hesitancy to trust and disclose, longer-term therapy is much more likely to be helpful.

Both while in counseling and out, Dave's relationship with God can be an incredible resource. The Bible tells us, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me" (Ps. 27:10). In other words, even though those who are nearest to us may let us down, God will never fail us. And the Apostle Paul reminds us that we are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6, King James Version). No matter how harmful our earthly parents or friends may have been, or how critical or condemning or rejecting, God is our perfect, loving, forgiving, encouraging heavenly Father.

When discussing God with avoidant persons, however, one must be sensitive to the possibility that they are presently angry with God, or that abuse they experienced came from parents or others who were supposedly representing God. When that has happened, it can require time to experience how different God is from the distorted picture of his character and feelings for us that parents or others created in us.

Conclusion

The problems or sickness of the heart experienced by someone with an avoidant personality are very painful, but they can be overcome. Proverbs 13:12 reminds us that a longing fulfilled "is a tree of life" (NIV). We all have a deep longing for love and relational connections and seek them out in our unique ways. This includes avoidant personalities who initially seem like they don't want relationships. Even when these deep longings seem to be beyond recognition, they are still at the core because every person is made in God's image. We all desire to be in relationships with others. And even though it is harder for those with avoidant personalities, they can do it with time and appropriate help.

Recommended Reading

A resource for further reading on the topic of avoidance is *Hiding from Love: How to Change the Withdrawal Patterns That Isolate and Imprison You* by Dr. John Townsend.² The author's discussions

of the hiding dilemma, helpful and harmful hiding, and hope for those who hide will enlighten counselors, ministry professionals, family members, and struggling individuals alike.

Also recommended is Robert Karen's book, *Becoming Attached*,³ on the development of attachment styles. Karen, using his gifts as a journalist and psychologist, presents the basic concepts of attachment in a way that is both readable and enjoyable.

References

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