

The Anxiety Trap: Cycle of Avoidance

Instruction page



1 Activity Type

Age: 10-18+

Participation Style:
1-1 activity
Group activity - individual play

Theme:
Reflective, mindful

Challenge Level
EASY

Resource Format:
Interactive activity
Conversation cues
PDF interactive conversion tool

2 General Activity Info

This reflective activity helps participants understand the Cycle of Avoidance, a common pattern in anxiety where short-term relief from discomfort reinforces long-term anxiety. By recognising the stages—Anxiety, Avoidance, Relief, and Intensification—participants can begin to break the loop by identifying where avoidance takes place in their own lives and what it's costing them.

This exercise builds awareness of:

- The connection between anxiety and avoidance
- Short-term vs long-term effects of avoidance
- Alternative coping strategies

This activity works well as a 1-1 therapeutic tool, a group discussion prompt, or a worksheet-based reflection.

3 Materials Needed

- A printed and laminated copy of the resource.

4 Step by Step Instructions

1. Introduce the Cycle

- Explain the four stages: Anxiety → Avoidance → Relief → Intensification. Clarify how this loop can become a trap and lead to bigger challenges over time.

2. Review Examples Together

- Go through at least one sample scenario as a group or with your client to demonstrate the cycle in action and what each stage of the scenario could look like (see an example on the next pages).
- Ask participants to work through the example and identify what these could look like. You can do it together in your 1-1 sessions. To expand, have them identify:
 - What caused the anxiety?
 - What was avoided?
 - What relief was experienced?
 - How did it worsen the problem?

3. Reflect and Discuss

- Group: Invite volunteers to share their cycles. Facilitate discussion on common patterns and alternative coping strategies.
- 1-1: Discuss together and explore what the client could try instead of avoidance in the future.

4. Optional Extension

- Brainstorm small actions to challenge avoidance in a safe way.
- Introduce tools like grounding techniques, journaling, or exposure planning.

Cycle of Avoidance

The Anxiety Trap

Anxiety

A situation triggers an anxious response that includes thoughts, physical symptoms, and feelings:

- **Thoughts:** fixation on worst case scenarios, doubts about ability to cope.
- **Physical symptoms:** shallow breathing, racing heart, shaking, sweating.
- **Feelings:** dread, irritability, restlessness

Avoidance

You avoid the anxiety trigger to escape the uncomfortable symptoms:

- You **cancel** a vacation due to fear of flying.
- You use **drugs or alcohol** to “loosen up” before socializing.
- You **procrastinate** on an important task.

Intensification

You begin to associate avoidance with feeling better. As a result, the next time you face a similar situation, the anxiety is worse and it's even more tempting to use avoidance:

- You give up on ever taking a **vacation**.
- You use more **drugs or alcohol** to socialize.
- You start doing **poorly** at work or school due to rushed projects, causing more anxiety and procrastination.

Relief

Avoiding the anxiety trigger lessens the discomfort, but the relief is temporary and comes at a cost:

- You miss out on your dream **vacation**.
- You come to rely on **drugs or alcohol** to socialize.
- You have to rush an **important task** due to procrastinating.

Here is a cycle example: Medical Anxiety – Avoiding a Check-up

You've noticed some unusual symptoms, but the thought of going to the doctor makes you anxious. You fear bad news or being judged. You keep putting off booking the appointment.

Cycle Example

Anxiety: Worry about possible diagnoses, embarrassment, or medical procedures.

Avoidance: Don't book the appointment.

Relief: You feel less anxious in the moment by not thinking about it.

Intensification: Symptoms may get worse, and the idea of going becomes even scarier over time.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

1. Fear of Public Speaking

You're asked to speak in front of your class or team. Your heart starts pounding, and your thoughts go blank. You consider making up an excuse to avoid it.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

2. Social Anxiety

You're invited to a party where you don't know many people. You feel nervous and uncomfortable just thinking about it. You start planning how to back out.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

3. Conflict Avoidance

You're upset with a friend but don't want to cause drama. Every time you try to bring it up, your anxiety flares. You avoid them instead.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

4. Job/School Interview Stress

You're scheduled for an interview, but you're worried you'll say the wrong thing. You consider cancelling or pretending you forgot.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

5. Fear of Failure

You want to apply for a new course or job, but your anxiety tells you you're not good enough. You delay applying – or don't apply at all.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

6. Performance Pressure

You're asked to demonstrate a skill (like playing an instrument, sports drill, or art). You panic and say you're not ready, even though you are.

the
therapeutic
resource
platform

7. Phone Call Anxiety

You need to make an important phone call to sort something out, but just thinking about it makes you anxious. You put it off again and again.



8. Medical Anxiety – Avoiding a Check-up

You've noticed some unusual symptoms but the thought of going to the doctor makes you anxious. You fear bad news or being judged. You keep putting off booking the appointment.



9. Anxiety Trigger:

You recently went through a difficult break-up. You begin to feel anxious at the thought of seeing your ex or being reminded of the relationship. You worry that you're not good enough or that future relationships will also fail.



10. You've been unhappy in your relationship for a while

The idea of breaking up makes you feel extremely anxious—you're afraid of hurting the other person, being alone, or dealing with the emotional fallout.



11. You hurt someone's feelings and know you should apologise.

You worry they'll be angry or reject you.



12. You see a job listing you really want

But you fear rejection or believe you're not good enough.

