

Seven steps to tackling avoidance



You may have tried to stop avoiding things before. But unless you have a clear plan and stick to it, change will be hard to make. Making one change at a time is the key thing to help you move forwards. This may mean choosing at first **not** to focus on other areas.

By setting targets you can focus on how to make the changes needed to get better. To do this, you need to decide your:

- **Short-term** targets. These are the changes you can make today, tomorrow and the next week.
- **Medium-term** targets. These are the changes to be put in place over the next few weeks.
- **Long-term** targets. This is where you want to be in six months or a year.

By working through the seven steps below you can learn how to plan clear ways of overcoming avoidance. The aim is to slowly plan **specific** activities to boost your confidence and tackle avoidance. The good news is that you plan this one step at a time. And you can keep practising a step until you feel comfortable at every step. That way it never seems too much or too scary.

Step 1: Identify and clearly define your problem

The following table lists the activities that are commonly avoided when you have low mood or depression. You will probably have noticed avoiding at least some of these activities.

Checklist: Identifying your patterns of worsening avoidance

As a result of how you feel are you:	Tick here if you have noticed this - even if just sometimes
Avoiding specific situations, objects, places or people because of fears about what harm might result?	
For example, shops, heights, spiders, meeting or talking to people	

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Putting off dealing with important practical problems (both large and small)?	
For example, delaying paying a bill when money is tight	
Not really being honest with others?	
For example, saying yes when you really mean no or by not saying things that you really want to	
Trying hard to avoid situations that bring about upsetting thoughts/memories?	
Avoiding physical activity or exercise that you should be able to do, because you have lots of worries about your physical health?	
Avoiding opening or replying to letters?	
Sleeping in to avoid doing things or meeting people?	
Looking to others to sort things out for you?	
Avoiding answering the phone, or the door when people visit?	
Avoiding having sex because of anxiety?	
Avoiding talking to others face to face?	
Avoiding being with others in crowded or hot places, or busy and large shops?	
Avoiding going on buses, in cars, taxis, etc., or any places where it's hard to escape?	
Avoiding being in situations where you may need to talk/do things with others?	
Avoiding walking alone far from home?	
Stopping attending religious services, night classes or local pubs/clubs because it feels just too much to cope with at present?	

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Write down any other activities you are avoiding here:

Example: Paul's avoidance

Paul has been invited to join a back-to-work course that starts in four weeks. He feels very anxious about going and fears he will go red and start stuttering. But he knows he needs to go to the course to help him rebuild his confidence.

Choosing a first target

Now it's your turn. Use the list above to choose a single target that you will focus on to start with. This is particularly important if you have ticked several in the checklist. It isn't possible to work on all these areas at once. Instead you need to decide which **one** area to focus on to start with.

Write down one problem you want to work on here. (Remember that this should be a problem of avoidance.)

Be a detective

The next thing is to do some research on your avoidance. First, record in detail every time you avoid your chosen problem over several days. At the back of the workbook in the *My notes* section write down:

- What you avoid.
- When you avoid it.
- How much you do it (for example, don't go out, don't go to the shops, don't say hello - because of worries).
- How long it lasts for.

Try to understand more about your avoidance and why you tend to do it. Try to work out why you avoid or escape from things at that time such as:

- The time of day.
- Whether you slept well the night before.
- Who you were with and how they responded.

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- How you felt emotionally.
 - What went through your mind.
 - How you felt emotionally and physically at the time.
 - Any other things you did to try to cope or escape.
- ... And anything else that seems to help explain your reaction.

Write any important things you have learned here:

Check point: is your target a realistic target?

Answer the **Questions for change** to find out:

Q. Is your target:

- Clear and realistic and something that you can tackle over the next week or two? Yes No
- Not so scary that you can't face doing it? Yes No
- Still helping you move forwards? Yes No

KEY POINT - Sometimes you need to make sure that your first target really is a small, focused problem so that you can tackle it in one step.

Now use your notes to decide if you need to break down your avoidance behaviour into smaller steps that you can target one at a time.

Q. Do you need to break the avoidance down into a number of smaller more achievable targets? Yes No

If you answered 'No', then please go straight to Step 2.

If you answered 'Yes', then keep reading about how to make sure you've chosen a realistic first target and write it here again.

My clear first step is:

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Example: Paul breaks his target into smaller steps

Paul wants to attend the back-to-work course. This starts in four weeks' time. Paul decides he needs to start building his confidence up towards getting there. He has realised that he tries to avoid talking to people, even to the extent of crossing the road if he sees someone ahead he knows.

Paul therefore decides to focus on something that would be a good first step towards getting to the course - building confidence when he's talking to others. This is something that would help tackle a big problem for him - which is affecting whether he can go to course.

Paul's target: I'm going to focus on feeling more comfortable talking to others.

Step 2: Think up as many solutions as possible to achieve your initial target

Try to come up with as many ideas as possible. Include completely whacky ideas in your list as well, even if you wouldn't choose to do them. This will help you to **think broadly**. Here are some useful questions to help you to think up possible solutions:

- What advice would you give a friend who was trying to tackle the same problem?
- What ridiculous solutions can you include as well as more sensible ones?
- What helpful suggestions would others make?
- How could you look at the solutions facing you differently? What would you have said before you felt like this, or what might you say about the situation, say in five years' time?
- What approaches have you tried in the past in similar circumstances?

KEY POINT - If you feel stuck, sometimes doing this task with someone you trust can help.

Example: Paul's ideas

I could:

- Pay an actor to be my friend and talk to me. I'd feel in charge then!
- Start small - and build up my confidence on the phone.
- Ask a friend to come round to chat so that I can practise talking again with someone who I know likes me.
- Start going again to the photography club I used to attend.

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Now write down as many possible options (including ridiculous ideas at first) for your own situation:

Step 3: Look at the pros and cons of each possible solution

Example: Paul's list of pros and cons

Idea	Pros (advantages)	Cons (disadvantages)
Pay an actor to be my friend and talk to me. I'd feel in charge then!	They'd be there all day. I could ask them to be friendly and nice	That's a crazy idea. But wouldn't it be great to have that much money!
Start small - and build up my confidence on the phone	This is a small step which is great	I'm actually okay on the phone. It's more when I actually am with someone that I start go red and clam up
Ask a friend to come round to chat so that I can practise talking again with someone who I know likes me	That sounds perfect. If it's someone I trust it wouldn't matter to me as much as someone who's not a friend. I could do that and I think it would help me build my confidence again	I might clam up. But then I don't think that should happen. I just need to plan a few conversation starters for if things go quiet. I think that's okay
Start going again to the photography club I used to attend	Wouldn't that be great! I could go in and suddenly be confident all over again with people I know	It just doesn't seem that realistic. It's too big a step. I'd turn up and just sit alone in the corner feeling embarrassed. Or I'd leave and never go back

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Write your own list of ideas into the following table, along with the pros and cons of each suggestion.

My suggestions from step 2	Pros (advantages)	Cons (disadvantages)

Step 4: Now choose one of the solutions

Choose a solution that is a small step in the right direction and you think will be likely to succeed. Look at the list you made in step 3 to help you with this. The best way to tackle avoidance is to plan **steady, slow changes**. In this way, you can rebuild your confidence. The step should be small enough to be possible, but big enough to move you forwards.

Example: Paul's choice

Paul decides to ask a friend to come round to chat so that he can practise talking again with someone he knows he gets on with.

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KEY POINT - The first step you decide on should be something that helps you tackle your avoidance. If it seems scary, it shouldn't be so scary that you can't do it. You must be realistic in your choice so that the target doesn't appear impossible to do.

Write your choice here:

Now check your choice against some of the **Questions for effective change**.

- Q. Will your chosen step be useful for changing how you are? Yes No
- Q. Is it a specific task so that you will know when you've done it? Yes No
- Q. Is it realistic, practical and achievable? Yes No

If you answered 'Yes' to all three questions your chosen step should help start you off.

Step 5: Plan the steps needed to carry it out

You need to have a clear plan that will help you to decide exactly **what** you are going to do and **when** you are going to do it. **Write down** the steps needed to carry out your plan. This will help you to think what to do and also think of the possible problems that might arise. An important part of the planning process is also to try to think what could block the plan from happening or make it hard for you to follow it. That way you can think about how you would respond to keep your plan on track.

Example: Paul's plan

Paul phones his friend Raj, whom he knows from way back at school. They have stayed in close touch since and remain good friends. Raj knows Paul has struggled with depression. But Paul hasn't seen Raj for a few weeks and is a little nervous about how things will go. He therefore decides the following plan: 'Raj will come by at 3 o'clock tomorrow. We can have a cup of tea or coffee and have a chat. If it's good weather we could walk and talk.'

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Paul also tries to think of what might go wrong or cause problems. He thinks he may feel uncomfortable about silences. Therefore he plans to make sure he has a few questions to use to get things going if needed. He looks through the hints and tips for starting and keeping conversations going in the Being assertive workbook. And now he feels confident Raj and he will have enough things to talk about.

Now write down your plan here:

What if you think that there's something that may block your plan? Write down what you could do next to unblock it.

Now check your plan against the rest of the **Questions for effective change:**

Q. Does your plan make clear what you are going to do and when you are going to do it? Yes No

Q. Is it an activity that won't be easily blocked or prevented by practical problems? Yes No

Q. Will it help you to learn useful things even if it doesn't work out perfectly? Yes No

Step 6: Carry out the plan