



How to Stop the Number One Cause of Most Human Misery

with Ronald Siegel, PsyD

What's the number one reason that people become trapped in anxiety or depression, are driven to overindulge, or just get stuck in their jobs or relationships?

I would argue that it often comes down to one thing:

Avoidance.

Actually, avoidance is evolutionarily hard-wired in our brains. You see, our brains developed for survival, and avoiding pain was an important part of survival.

But these days, this valuable survival mechanism is also making many of us miserable.

Now, it makes perfect sense that we're hard-wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain. The things our ancestors enjoyed, like having sex, eating, getting out of the cold, or avoiding injury contributed tremendously to survival.

So what could be wrong with that? Well - unfortunately, a lot. Our hard-wired tendency to try to avoid pain actually causes much of our suffering.

When you think about it, avoidance is at the heart of a remarkable range of difficulties.

It can drive our clients to get stuck in anxiety or phobias, sink into depression, and it even plays a role in chronic pain.

I'll show you what I mean.

Anxiety

Let's take anxiety first. We think of anxiety as apprehension, nervousness, and worry. It's also associated with hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system.



But anxiety disorders actually involve the *avoidance* of situations that cause us to feel apprehensive, nervous, or worried. And the longer avoidance continues, the more entrenched these disorders actually become.

You've probably had clients who skipped a party, canceled a flight, or skirted confrontation with a loved one because they wished to avoid the fear and anxiety it might cause.

We might even say that avoidance is the opposite of courage. I once heard a famous actor put it well, saying, "Courage isn't about not feeling fear - courage is about feeling fully afraid and doing what it makes sense to do anyway."

Depression

Next, let's take depression. Have you ever thought about the difference between sadness and depression?

One difference is that *sadness feels alive and fluid* and is an essential part of living a full life. On the other hand, *depression feels dead and stuck* and gets in the way of living.

In fact, depression is often a result of trying to avoid sadness and other sorts of emotional pain.

Something curious happens whenever we try to cut out one side of our emotional experience; we dampen the other side as well.

Cutting off one pole of an emotional experience compresses the other pole.

For instance, who hasn't held back from really engaging in a romantic relationship to avoid getting hurt, only to find that we then miss out on the joys of love?

Many clients come to discover that trying to eliminate painful feelings flattens out their emotional life, leading to a general deadness.

In their attempt to avoid feeling sadness, anger, or other negative emotions, people cut themselves off from joy and interest.

Chronic Pain

And last, I mentioned chronic pain. Many chronic pain disorders involve fearfully tightening muscles – what's called "bracing and guarding" – in an attempt to avoid re-injury or an exacerbation of pain. Patients restrict their lives more and more, becoming frightened of ordinary movements, not to mention the physical exercise that could otherwise increase their strength, endurance, and flexibility.



Their lives go downhill as they focus more and more on what seems to make their pain better or worse and give up the activities that might make their lives richer and more meaningful.

So here too we see that avoidance – in this case trying desperately to avoid feeling further physical pain – traps people in fear-pain-fear cycles that can actually maintain their pain.

An Antidote for Avoidance

But there's hope. There are simple practices that are an effective antidote to avoidance.

I'm talking about mindfulness.

How can mindfulness work to counteract avoidance in so many situations?

Well, let's look at five key ways that mindfulness can help patients move beyond avoidance and transform the way they respond to the conditions we've just talked about.

1) Helping Clients *Be With* Difficult Emotions

First, look again with me at anxiety.

Instead of trying to avoid a frightening situation to stave off that dreaded "anxious" feeling, mindfulness gives us another option.

Mindfulness trains the brain to approach, and then *be with* experiences - to feel the heart race and the breath quicken, and then enter into the scary activity anyway.

I would argue that mindfulness practice helps us recognize that in the body, anxiety feels the same as excitement, just with a different set of thoughts.

Patients discover that nothing lasts forever; eventually panic subsides, and they see that they didn't actually die, even though they went to the party, flew on the jet, or faced a conflict with someone they cared about.

Next, let's look at how this might apply to depression. When people get depressed, they shut down emotions – go dead – and get stuck in repeated thoughts about inadequacy or badness.

Mindfulness practice can prepare patients to confront the next wave of depression with a very different attitude – with interest and curiosity about exactly what they're feeling at the moment, and with some perspective on negative thinking.

This can help them discover the underlying sadness, anger, or fear that is sometimes masked by depression, so that they can connect with these feelings by tuning into the body in the same way they would during mindfulness practice.



Learning to *be with* difficult emotions in this way also accomplishes some important things beyond helping patients get past symptoms.

2) Why Mindfulness is One Key to Health

Second, mindfulness can help us become more integrated.

You may have heard my friend Dan Siegel discuss how health involves *integration*. But when people avoid experiences, they become *less* integrated.

In fact, one way to understand all psychopathology, or psychological distress, is that it involves a state of *dis-integration*.

Feelings, memories, thoughts, and images get split off from awareness – they get suppressed or repressed. And this leaves people stressed and distracted – unable to fully engage with whatever is happening in the here and now.

Mindfulness practices help to treat many problems because, for the most part, the problems each involve this sort of dis-integration – splitting off painful experiences.

Integration frees our patients to think more clearly about problems, to be empathically connected with others when they're in pain, and to behave more skillfully in the world. It really makes life much more worth living!

3) Mindfulness - A *Holding Environment* during Difficult Times

Now, a third way that mindfulness practices help is by providing a *holding environment* during difficult times.

Think about how in successful parenting, a caregiver is able to emotionally hold a child who is in distress, and how this holding helps the child to feel soothed, and then able to regulate his or her emotions.

This is the same process that's described by others as part of secure attachment.

We try to develop this same sort of holding in therapeutic relationships, where we ride out emotional storms with the patient, providing a kind of ballast for their voyage.

It turns out that mindfulness practice can do something similar. When we adopt a familiar posture in meditation, and begin following the breath or attending to another object of awareness, we feel "held."



There's a sense of comfort and safety that comes from returning to the present moment in this structured way. And this holding can be fortified further by mindfulness practices specifically designed to cultivate loving-kindness and self-compassion.

4) Mindfulness Practices Help Us Learn to be Less Identified with Our Thoughts

The fourth way that mindfulness can be an effective antidote for avoidance is by training the brain to drop below the thought stream and tune into sensory reality. As patients become accustomed to this, they develop the *habit* of not identifying as much with their thoughts.

They develop what CBT clinicians call *metacognitive awareness* – the ability to see thoughts as just thoughts, rather than as reality, and to see how powerfully those thoughts are influenced by culture, past experiences, and the mood of the moment.

This further frees them from believing their thoughts as truth, and in the process opens a way for them to resolve a lot of psychological distress.

5) Mindfulness Can Help Us Get Our Minds Off Ourselves

Finally, one of the most powerful contributions of mindfulness practice to psychological well-being lies in its capacity to diminish relentless self-preoccupation.

Almost all psychopathology involves a preoccupation with self. Instead, mindfulness helps patients see their basic interconnection with other people and nature more generally, in order to embrace their part in the circle of life.

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So when it comes to helping people overcome avoidance, the cause of so much misery, mindfulness practices can be instrumental. These practices can help us to accept discomfort, and approach, rather than avoid uncomfortable experiences.

