

Week 145, Day 4

Working with Common Issues That Can Often Fuel Avoidance

Helping Clients Uncover the Cost of Avoidance

with Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT, and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

Dr. Buczynski: How do we help clients when avoidance might be preventing them from being fully themselves?

Today, Dr. Stan Tatkin will walk us through a powerful way to help clients recognize when avoidance is working against their best interests.

Dr. Tatkin: The problem with avoidance, like drug addiction or alcoholism, is that it's egosyntonic. The people who are using avoidance don't see a problem. In fact, what is the problem? My life is good - it works for me; although they rarely even know they are using it, so they are not going to admit that. But what do we do with this matter of egosyntonic avoidance? We have to find a way to make it egodystonic -- that is to find ways of proving this person actually suffers from avoidance by not being able to be themselves. It's a bug, not a feature.

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Some of that is doing, again, investigatory work into their childhood and adaptation. Then also look on a personality level and a relations level to their capacity

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to self-activate. In other words, in avoidance there's a self-activation problem where the person cannot be themselves fully and the real self is held captive by a pain avoiding ego, but they are unaware of it. What are you giving up? How are you actually being pushed around by your own avoidance? You think it's giving you control, but you are actually not in control because you would have to obey certain rules of ways of comporting yourself that are incredibly stressful and energy consuming.

The people who are avoidant or avoiding are actually spending more resources than any other group, because their interpersonal stress is higher than any other group. We know this by blood levels and urine levels of something called corticotropin-releasing factor which is a precursor to corticosteroid dumping in the blood. That causes a lot of wear and tear on all organs. Interpersonal stress with avoidant people is extremely high and leads to health issues. It also leads to issues of loneliness, isolation and not being able to have another person upon whom they can depend. We know that in itself not being able to fully depend on another person also can lead to a shorter lifespan, health issues, mental health issues, and so on.

We have a lot of knowledge about the downsides to avoiding. What we want to do instead of educating people and just telling them, which they will reject, is to wait for evidence. Usually people step into their own ditch and hoist themselves on their own petard. If you wait long enough they will provide you with evidence that their own avoidance causes them trouble. Either they are chased away from relationships or they are not able to be fully realized in relationships, because they are afraid constantly. That's not freedom. Their lives become very narrow because there's a limit to what they can do, how they can express, or how much they can engage with another person. Again, their exit strategy is going to be flight and that's not choice. That is automatic and they are pressured to do that.

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We are going to look for ways to flip this into something negative. It seems so difficult for you to say what's true to your partner. Rather than expose or risk exposing yourself, you keep it to yourself. This makes you angrier with your partner. It makes your relationship more untenable and then makes you want to go out and do other things. It's hard for you to be yourself in this environment. It's hard for you to stay engaged. Why can't you stay and make the other person leave? Why is it always you that has to back up? It's so hard for you to go into conflict, I think, because you fear you are not going to be able to hold up that the way you handle it is by pushing away and going away.

There are so many ways of skinning this and people will always give you evidence for why their strategy actually blows back on them. That's what you are going to leverage -- you are going to leverage what they admit. There are strategies for getting them to admit it also

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without them knowing that you are doing it and your fingerprints aren't on it. Again, there's a benefit in working in couples because you can always employ partners to work against each other in a way that exposes their defenses. When they do that, the work accelerates.

If I do know somebody and I have built a therapeutic alliance with them, then I can confront them even if they are distancing, because I have much more of an alliance with them. They trust me more. They know I know them more. I am not going to make the anticipated errors of misunderstanding them, which is part of an injury that

people with avoidance often carry with them -- being misread, misunderstood, and painted badly. Given that you have that relationship with that person, then you can confront them by saying, “You do this to your own detriment. You are going to lose your partner if you continue to do this. Why would you want to do this, when it hurts you in this way? Why would you want to be so self-harming? That seems to hurt you more than it hurts the other person.”

We are backed by data that we've collected which gives us the credibility to confront. The problem is that these defenses are so tight with so many people that unless you have enough evidence behind you, they can dismiss it. That's why there's a certain, again, importance for the therapist to spend a lot of time gathering data, inquiring, being inquisitive, interviewing, and getting information so as to be able to use that information oftentimes to go up against a defense. If you do it too soon, the person just goes "later," and that's it.

With avoidance in couples we can employ the other partner a lot, again, because we are gathering growing evidence both historically and currently that the avoidance actually is self-harming. We can put back to our patients that what they are doing is actually self-harming and that we are supporting the self while attacking the maladaptive defenses. We do that surgically so as not to get them to mistake our intention, then we can start to loosen that person's hold on the defense. Because after all I am supporting you, I have you in mind, I care about you, and this is hurting you. Why would you want to do that?

That gives me more power, as long as I am supporting the self. A lot of new therapists don't know how to do that. Their countertransference may color that intervention in a way that the patient can take it as an attack, or you don't like me, or you are angry about my avoidance.

There's a lot of countertransference with the therapist and avoidant patients. We don't like it. We are of no use. We are being devalued. Nothing we say is getting in. The person is dismissing what we are saying. We don't like that and so we have to watch our countertransference with avoidance.

Dr. Buczynski: For Stan, it's often important to help clients collect evidence on exactly how they are limited by their avoidance. This can help them recognize that avoidance usually only gives them the illusion of being in control.

But right now, I'd like to hear what you think: How will you use some of these ideas today in your work with clients? Please leave a comment below.

Now, tomorrow is Friday which means it's time for our Critical Insights session. I'll be joined by Dr. Ron Siegel and Dr. Kelly McGonigal. We'll deconstruct many of the ideas from this week and look for new ways to apply them to your practice.

I'll see you tomorrow.

