APPROACH & AVOIDANCE

Understanding What We Move Toward, What We Move Away From & What For

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THE STARTING POINT | WHY WE APPROACH OR AVOID

Throughout life, we make decisions about what to move toward and what to move away from.

We approach experiences that offer connection, opportunity, enjoyment, achievement, or growth. We avoid experiences that appear threatening, uncomfortable, overwhelming, or potentially harmful.

Often, these responses happen automatically.

We withdraw from a difficult conversation. Delay an important decision. Pursue an opportunity. Seek reassurance. Establish a boundary. Or step away from something that no longer serves us.

Neither approach nor avoidance is inherently good or bad. Both can serve useful purposes.

Avoidance can protect our safety, energy, boundaries, and well-being. But it can also restrict our experiences and reinforce fears.

Approach can help us build confidence, capabilities, and meaningful connections. But approaching something isn't always the healthiest choice, particularly when we're ignoring legitimate risks or exceeding our capacity.

The opportunity is to better understand what motivates our responses, what they're accomplishing, and whether they're helping us move toward the life and relationships we want.

Avoidance can be a guardrail. Approach can be a training ground.

The skill is learning when we need protection, when we're ready for practice, and when another response might serve us better.

UNDERSTAND APPROACH & AVOIDANCE

What Are We Moving Toward or Away From?

Approach and avoidance are motivational responses that influence how we navigate our experiences.

We don't respond only to what's happening. We also respond to what we anticipate might happen, drawing on previous experiences, emotions, beliefs, and expectations.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Approach | Moving Toward Something

Approach involves engaging with something we want, value, need, or believe may be worthwhile. This might include pursuing a goal, initiating connection, expressing a need, trying something unfamiliar, or addressing a difficult situation.

Avoidance | Moving Away From Something

Avoidance involves reducing, delaying, limiting, or preventing contact with something we anticipate may be difficult, uncomfortable, or harmful.

This might include postponing a conversation, withdrawing from conflict, avoiding a risk, declining an obligation, or establishing distance from someone.

The Function Matters More Than the Behavior

The same behavior can serve different purposes. Someone might decline a social invitation because they need rest, because the environment feels unsafe, or because they're afraid of being judged.

The behavior looks similar. The purpose is different.

Likewise, someone might initiate a difficult conversation to build connection or to obtain reassurance and escape uncertainty.

Understanding the function helps us evaluate whether the response is useful.

When We Want Competing Things

Sometimes we want to approach and avoid the same experience. We want intimacy but fear vulnerability. We want change but value stability. We want independence but fear disappointing others.

These competing motivations can create hesitation, ambivalence, or feeling stuck.

The goal isn't necessarily to eliminate one need. It's to understand both.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What experiences, relationships, or responsibilities do I tend to approach or avoid?
- What am I hoping to gain, protect, prevent, or escape?
- What do I anticipate might happen?
- Where do I experience competing motivations?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Understand what our responses are attempting to accomplish before deciding whether they need to change.

RECOGNIZE THE UTILITY OF AVOIDANCE

When Stepping Away Protects Us and When It Restricts Us

Avoidance is often described as something we need to overcome.

But sometimes stepping away is exactly what we need. Avoidance can provide safety, preserve resources, support emotional regulation, and establish appropriate boundaries.

The challenge is recognizing when avoidance is serving those purposes and when it may be unnecessarily limiting our lives.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Avoidance as Self-Protection

Avoidance can be a useful response when we're facing genuine threats, harmful interactions, unreasonable demands, or situations beyond our current capacity.

For example:

- Leaving a hostile or unsafe interaction.
- Limiting contact with someone who repeatedly disregards boundaries.
- Declining another responsibility when already overwhelmed.
- Taking a break from a difficult conversation to regulate and return later.

These responses may reflect intentional self-protection rather than fear or unwillingness.

Avoidance as Short-Term Relief

Avoidance can also reduce immediate discomfort. We anticipate something difficult, move away from it, and feel better. That relief can reinforce the behavior, making avoidance more likely the next time.

For example, someone who fears disagreement may repeatedly avoid expressing preferences. They experience less conflict in the moment but have fewer opportunities to learn how to navigate differences.

Over time, their options may become more restricted.

Discomfort, Danger & Capacity

Not all uncomfortable experiences are dangerous. And not every difficult experience is appropriate to approach.

Consider three questions:

- **Discomfort:** Is this unfamiliar, challenging, or emotionally difficult?
- **Danger:** Is there a credible threat to my safety or well-being?
- **Capacity:** Do I have the emotional, physical, or practical resources to engage?

These experiences can overlap. Recognizing the difference helps us determine whether to approach, adjust, seek support, postpone, or disengage.

Protection Versus Restriction

Avoidance becomes worth examining when it repeatedly prevents us from pursuing things we value, developing capabilities, or addressing important needs.

The question isn't simply whether we're avoiding something.

It's whether avoidance is helping us protect something important or keeping us from experiences we're capable of navigating.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What does avoidance help me protect or manage?
- When has stepping away been a healthy choice?
- When does avoiding something provide relief but create difficulties later?
- Am I responding to genuine danger, limited capacity, or anticipated discomfort?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Recognize avoidance as a potentially useful tool while developing awareness of when it may be restricting our choices.

UNDERSTAND THE GROWTH POTENTIAL OF APPROACH

Building Confidence Through Exposure, Experience & Repetitions

We sometimes believe we need confidence before taking action. But confidence often develops through experience. By approaching manageable challenges, trying unfamiliar behaviors, and learning from what happens, we can expand our capabilities and become more comfortable navigating uncertainty.

We don't always become confident and then act. Sometimes we act, learn, and gradually become more confident.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Exposure | Moving Toward Manageable Challenges

Exposure involves intentionally engaging with something we've been avoiding or anticipating with discomfort. The objective isn't to overwhelm ourselves or ignore genuine risks.

It's to create opportunities for new learning through appropriately paced experiences. Someone who fears difficult conversations might begin by expressing a small preference before attempting a more challenging discussion.

Experience | Testing Our Predictions

We often make decisions based on what we think might happen.

Approaching a situation provides an opportunity to compare our predictions with our actual experience. Sometimes things go better than expected. Sometimes they're difficult.

Either way, we can learn about the situation and our ability to respond.

Repetitions | Building Capabilities

One experience doesn't always change a familiar pattern. Repeated practice can help us develop greater familiarity, flexibility, and confidence. Small, manageable repetitions often provide a more sustainable path toward growth than attempting to change everything at once.

Confidence Versus Certainty

Certainty means believing we know what will happen. Confidence involves developing trust in our ability to respond to what happens.

We may never be certain that a conversation will go well, but we can become more confident in our ability to communicate, regulate emotions, and navigate disagreement.

Progress Doesn't Require Perfect Outcomes

An attempt can be worthwhile even when it doesn't produce the outcome we wanted.

Success may involve trying something different, remaining engaged, learning from the experience, or discovering that a different boundary is needed.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What have I been waiting to feel confident enough to attempt?
- What smaller version of that experience could I practice?
- What am I predicting will happen?
- What might I learn even if the outcome isn't what I hoped?
- What capabilities could I develop through repeated experience?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Use manageable challenges and repeated experiences to build confidence, capabilities, and greater flexibility.

RECOGNIZE OUR PATTERNS & TRADEOFFS

What Works Now May Not Work Later

Approach and avoidance can become familiar patterns because they accomplish something in the moment.

The challenge is that immediate relief or reward doesn't always align with our longer-term needs and goals.

Understanding these tradeoffs helps us recognize when a familiar response may deserve reconsideration.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

The Avoidance–Relief Cycle

A common pattern looks like this: Anticipate discomfort → Avoid the experience → Feel relief → Become more likely to avoid again.

For example, postponing an uncomfortable conversation may reduce anxiety today while allowing the unresolved issue to grow.

This doesn't mean all avoidance is unhelpful. It means short-term relief is only one part of the picture.

Approach Can Also Be Avoidance

Being active doesn't necessarily mean we're approaching what matters.

We might:

- Overwork to avoid emotional discomfort.
- Overplan to avoid making a decision.
- Seek repeated reassurance to avoid uncertainty.
- Initiate arguments to avoid vulnerability.
- Stay busy helping others to avoid our own needs.

The visible behavior doesn't always reveal its purpose.

The Short-Term & Long-Term Tradeoffs

Consider what a response provides immediately and what it may contribute over time.

Response	Short-term benefit	Possible longer-term consequence
Avoiding a difficult conversation	Relief from conflict	Unresolved concerns
Establishing a boundary	Protection and reduced strain	Greater safety and clarity
Trying something unfamiliar	New experience and learning	Expanded capabilities
Repeatedly seeking reassurance	Temporary certainty	Greater reliance on external reassurance

These are possibilities, not predetermined outcomes. Context matters. **Familiar Doesn't Always Mean Useful**

Sometimes we continue using responses that worked in earlier circumstances but no longer fit our current lives.

Recognizing a pattern creates an opportunity to evaluate whether it's still serving us.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What immediate benefit do I receive from my typical response?
- What might that response cost me over time?
- Am I staying busy or engaged to avoid something else?
- Which familiar patterns may no longer fit my current circumstances?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Look beyond immediate relief or reward to understand the broader consequences of our choices.

NAVIGATE COMPETING NEEDS & MAKE INTENTIONAL CHOICES

Protection, Growth, Values & Capacity

Approach and avoidance don't need to be all-or-nothing decisions. Sometimes the most useful response is somewhere in between. We can approach gradually, establish conditions for engagement, seek support, adjust expectations, or choose not to participate.

The objective is to expand our options rather than automatically repeat a familiar response.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Recognize Competing Needs

We may want connection and independence. Growth and stability. Safety and adventure. Honesty and acceptance. These needs don't always have to compete for a single winner.

We can explore how to honor more than one.

Consider Values & Direction

Ask what matters beyond immediate comfort or discomfort. Does this response support the relationships, responsibilities, experiences, or personal qualities I want to cultivate?

Sometimes a values-aligned decision involves approaching something difficult. Other times it involves protecting a boundary or choosing to disengage.

Evaluate Capacity & Context

Our ability to engage can change depending on stress, fatigue, available support, emotional state, and competing demands.

What feels manageable today may not be manageable tomorrow.

Choosing to postpone something can be intentional and useful, particularly when paired with a plan to revisit it if appropriate.

Expand the Options

Rather than choosing between complete engagement and complete avoidance, consider:

- Approaching in smaller steps.
- Changing the setting or timing.
- Asking for support.
- Establishing limits or conditions.
- Taking a break and returning.
- Choosing a different way to participate.
- Intentionally disengaging when protection is the priority.

The goal isn't always to push through. Sometimes it's to find a different way forward.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What competing needs am I trying to navigate?
- What choice best reflects my values and circumstances?
- What is my current capacity?
- Is there a middle-ground option I haven't considered?
- What would an intentional decision look like rather than an automatic reaction?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop greater agency by choosing responses that reflect our needs, values, resources, and circumstances.

PRACTICE FLEXIBILITY & BUILD CAPABILITIES

Small Experiments, Meaningful Learning & Building Reps

Understanding our patterns is useful. Practicing different responses helps us develop new capabilities. We don't need to change everything at once. Small experiments can help us discover when approach is useful, when avoidance is protective, and how to respond more intentionally.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Notice the Pattern

Identify a situation where you regularly approach, avoid, delay, withdraw, or seek reassurance. Consider what you're anticipating and what your response helps you accomplish.

Identify the Purpose

Ask: *"What am I trying to gain, protect, prevent, or escape?"*

This can help distinguish between a protective response and a familiar pattern that may be limiting you.

Choose a Manageable Experiment

If approaching seems appropriate, identify a small step that offers an opportunity for learning.

For example: Rather than avoiding every disagreement, practice expressing one preference in a relatively safe interaction.

If protection is the priority, practice establishing a boundary or stepping away intentionally.

Review the Game Tape

Afterward, consider:

- What did I anticipate?
- What actually happened?
- What did I notice about my response?
- What did I learn about my capabilities or limits?
- What might I repeat or adjust?

Build Reps | Test & Learn

Practice takes repetition. Some experiences will be easier than others. The objective isn't to eliminate discomfort, achieve perfect outcomes, or always make the right choice.

It's to develop a broader range of responses and greater confidence in navigating different situations.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What pattern would I like to understand or change?
- What small experiment feels appropriate and manageable?
- What would I like to learn from the experience?
- How will I recognize progress beyond simply achieving the desired outcome?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Build flexibility through intentional practice, experience, reflection, and adjustment.

CONNECTING ME TO WE & US

How Approach & Avoidance Influence Ourselves & Our Relationships

ME | UNDERSTANDING MY RESPONSES

- What do I tend to approach or avoid?
- What am I trying to protect, gain, or prevent?
- How might I expand my capabilities and choices?

WE | UNDERSTANDING OUR INTERACTIONS

- How do our approach and avoidance patterns influence communication and connection?
- Does one person pursue while another withdraws?
- Can we recognize the needs and protective intentions behind each other's responses without excusing harmful behavior?

US | CULTIVATING OUR RELATIONSHIP

- What patterns help or restrict our shared relationship?
- How can we create conditions that support safety, engagement, growth, and repair?
- What agreements or practices might help us navigate challenging experiences together?

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Choose one situation where you notice a familiar approach or avoidance response.

Ask yourself:

1. **NOTICE:** What am I moving toward or away from?
2. **UNDERSTAND:** What am I trying to gain, protect, prevent, or escape?
3. **EVALUATE:** Is this response protecting me, restricting me, helping me grow, or some combination?
4. **CHOOSE:** What response best fits my values, safety, capacity, and circumstances?
5. **PRACTICE:** What's one small action I could take—or intentionally choose not to take?
6. **REVIEW:** What did I learn, and what might I try next?

The objective isn't to force change. It's to develop greater awareness, flexibility, and choice.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Sometimes we need to step away to protect ourselves. Sometimes we need to step toward something to discover what we're capable of. And sometimes the most useful response is somewhere in between.

Avoidance isn't always weakness. Approach isn't always courage.

The same behavior can serve different purposes depending on the circumstances.

What matters is developing the ability to recognize our patterns, understand what they're accomplishing, and choose how we want to respond.

Avoidance can be a guardrail. Approach can be a training ground.

The opportunity is learning when we need protection, when we're ready for practice, and how to build the confidence and capabilities to navigate more of life's experiences.

The goal isn't to always approach or never avoid. It's to develop the flexibility to choose what serves us best.