

Reconnect with the things you enjoy

We are so afraid of pain and suffering that we tend to avoid many situations because we fear they may trigger these feelings. This tendency to get rid of unpleasant feelings, thoughts or situations is called experiential avoidance. We all engage in some level of experiential avoidance as a way to try to control our emotional life and our inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, memories). However, avoiding situations or experiences or numbing oneself to particular thoughts or feelings just makes one more averse to such experiences without resulting in much benefit. It may help us escape pain in the short term, but often leads to poor wellbeing and quality of life in the longer term.

Indeed, by engaging in experiential avoidance, you deny yourself the opportunity to engage in experiences and situations that also bring pleasure, joy and fulfilment. Instead of building your life upon the things you value and want to experience, you are building your life upon escaping the things you fear.

In this activity, we will ask you to list situations, activities or event you have been avoiding due to the fear that these will trigger your grief. The goal is to make you aware of the avoidance you do and help you to stop engaging with it. Trying to accept your pain and grief does not mean that your loss is OK or that you just resign to it. It means you are letting go of things you cannot change to free yourself to live your life now.

Let's practice

Here are some examples of situations childless people tend to avoid. Select the ones that apply to you.

- ☐ Avoiding places or situations with children (e.g., family gatherings, parties, baby showers)
- ☐ Not being able to talk about your desire for children with close people
- ☐ Not trying new things or making adjustments because you may still end up having (more) children
- ☐ Not trying something you always thought you would do with your child
- ☐ Omitting the fact of not having children
- ☐ Taking your mind off unpleasant or painful thoughts or feelings related with your unmet desire for children, for instance, distracting yourself with anything or everything when you are feeling bad

Are there other situations, activities or events that you avoid? List them below, being as specific as you can.

Now please order the situations you listed in terms of how afraid you are that they will trigger very strong and overwhelming negative emotions, from the least to the most threatening, by placing a number in front of them (starting in 1–least threatening and counting up to most threatening).

Once you have ranked the situations, start on the least threatening situation and try not to avoid it. Be conscious that the first time you do so you will experience emotional pain. In your first attempts you may want to invite someone who knows and understands your grief to go with you, for instance, your partner or a close friend.

What were the things you fear would happen?

What really happened?

What pleasure, joy, fulfilment or other benefit did you derive from not avoiding the situation?

Repeat this experience until you feel you can deal with your emotions in the situation in a more manageable way and the pleasure you derive is bigger than the suffering it causes you. After, progress to the second situation and repeat the process, and so forth, until you exhaust your list. This is a task that will never end: every day you have to live your life NOW.