

Avoidant Personality Disorder

SYMPTOMS

This disorder is characterized by a long-standing and complex pattern of feelings of inadequacy, extreme sensitivity to what other people think about them, and social inhibition. It typically manifests itself by early adulthood and includes a majority of the following symptoms:

- **avoids occupational activities** that involve significant interpersonal contact, because of fears of criticism, disapproval, or rejection
- is **unwilling** to get involved with people unless certain of being liked
- **shows restraint** within intimate relationships because of the fear of being shamed or ridiculed
- is **preoccupied** with being criticized or rejected in social situations
- is **inhibited** in new interpersonal situations because of feelings of inadequacy
- views self as **socially inept**, personally unappealing, or inferior to others
- is unusually **reluctant** to take personal risks or to engage in any new activities because they may prove embarrassing

Causes

There is no clear cause for avoidant personality disorder; some theories state that it is a function of how one is brought up, but biological factors are likely as well. Individuals with a disfiguring condition or illness may overlap with those with this disorder. This disorder is fairly uncommon and there is little information about occurrence by gender or about family pattern.

Treatment

A person with this disorder may eliminate some of the disabling defenses if a positive relationship is formed with a health professional. Counseling may therefore be helpful. Medications can also reduce the symptoms. People with this disorder usually have some ability to relate to others appropriately, and with treatment the prognosis improves. Without treatment, a person with avoidant personality disorder may become resigned to a life of near isolation. They may go on to develop a second psychiatric disorder such as substance abuse or a mood disorder such as depression.

Medications

Medical treatment of this condition is generally contraindicated, as psychotherapy is preferred.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy appears to be the most beneficial form of treatment for Avoidant Personality Disorder. Individual counseling is much preferred over group approaches as the condition poses obstacles to group interaction. Treatment should primarily focus on establishing a trusting therapist-client relationship to avoid early termination, which is common with this disorder. Assertiveness training can be an effective treatment approach. Unlike the other personality disorders in which denial, minimization, and externalization bring an illusory comfort and sense of personal justification, individuals with AvPD may well be motivated to seek change because the dynamics of their personality disorder are genuinely difficult to tolerate. They will frequently describe social and

occupational problems; they will rarely have been able to develop a social network that is strong enough to help them through personal crises

Transference and Countertransference Issues

Transference for individuals with AvPD is usually anxious fearfulness of the rejection, humiliation, and exasperation of the service providers.

Countertransference involves the clinicians' reactions to the hypersensitivity and psychological fragility of these clients. They tend to elicit either overprotectiveness or excessive ambition on the part of service providers. Then, when the slow pace of discernible progress becomes frustrating, there may be an inclination for the clinicians to become the rejecting, exasperated, and judgmental people that individuals with AvPD feared they would be.

Another possibility for countertransference is an easy acceptance of and cooperation with the safety of the therapeutic relationship against a more dangerous external world. It may be appealing to service providers to be the trusted, admired, and depended upon "good parent" that these individuals never had.