

## How Avoidance and Control Strategies Maintain Anxiety

Anxiety is uncomfortable, and most people don't like feeling anxious. But trying really hard to avoid feeling anxious can backfire over the long term.

The general cycle of anxious avoidance often goes like this:

1. Encounter a trigger (e.g., neighbor invites you to a party with people you don't know)
2. Interpret the trigger as threatening (e.g., "It will be awkward. I hate small talk!")
3. Do something to escape, avoid, or control the threat (e.g., decline the invitation)
4. This brings relief in the short term ("Whew, now I don't have to make a fool of myself. It will feel so much better to spend this evening at home.")
5. Anxiety is prolonged in the long term. Because:
  - a. Avoidance feeds into your original threat interpretation – acting like the party is scary makes it feel scary. And you never get the chance to find out if it could actually be fun. So, you stay anxious.
  - b. Relief feels good, so it reinforces that using avoidance is a good strategy.
  - c. You miss the chance to practice other coping (e.g., you never get better at meeting strangers if you never meet strangers). So your confidence stays low.
  - d. When the cycle repeats, avoidance becomes a habit.
6. Avoidance often has other costs (e.g., feeling discouraged, getting in the way of personal or professional goals).

