

Opinion Article

The Role of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy in Treating Personality Disorders: Symptoms, Causes and Risk Factors

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Avoidant Personality Disorder (AVPD) is a chronic and pervasive pattern of social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation or criticism. It is one of several personality disorders listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and affects approximately 2.5% of the general population. Individuals with AVPD tend to avoid social interactions and situations due to intense fear of rejection, disapproval, or embarrassment. This fear is so severe that it interferes with their ability to develop and maintain personal relationships and succeed in work or school environments.

While many people experience occasional social anxiety or fear of rejection, avoidant personality disorder involves extreme levels of these emotions, significantly impacting a person's daily life. The disorder often leads to social isolation and difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships, which can, in turn, contribute to feelings of loneliness, depression and low self-esteem.

Symptoms of avoidant personality disorder

The core symptoms of AVPD revolve around social inhibition and the avoidance of interpersonal situations due to an overwhelming fear of criticism and rejection. The disorder is characterized by a range of emotional, cognitive and behavioural symptoms, which can vary in intensity.

Negative self-perception: People with AVPD have a distorted and negative view of themselves. They often perceive themselves as unworthy or incapable of handling social relationships, which contributes to their avoidance of interpersonal contact.

Overthinking social interactions: Individuals with AVPD tend to overanalyse social encounters, replaying conversations in their heads and focusing on perceived mistakes or awkward moments. This rumination further fuels their fear of future interactions.

Catastrophic thinking: People with AVPD often expect the worst possible outcome in social situations, assuming that they

will be rejected, embarrassed, or criticized, even when there is no evidence to support these fears.

Avoidance of social interactions: As the name implies, people with avoidant personality disorder avoid social interactions, particularly those where they fear negative evaluation. They may turn down invitations to social gatherings, avoid initiating conversations and isolate themselves from others.

Difficulty establishing relationships: Due to their fear of rejection and self-perceived inadequacy, individuals with AVPD struggle to form close relationships, even when they desire them. Their avoidance behaviour creates a cycle of loneliness and isolation.

Reluctance to try new activities: People with AVPD may avoid engaging in new activities or hobbies due to fear of failure or ridicule. This avoidance prevents them from experiencing personal growth and reinforces their belief that they are incompetent.

Causes and risk factors of avoidant personality disorder

There is evidence that avoidant personality disorder may have a genetic component. Studies have shown that personality traits linked to AVPD, such as social inhibition and anxiety, can run in families. People with a family history of anxiety disorders or other personality disorders may be at a higher risk of developing AVPD.

Childhood experiences play a significant role in the development of AVPD. People with the disorder often report experiences of early trauma, neglect, or rejection by parents or peers. Children who are excessively criticized or shamed during their formative years may develop feelings of inadequacy and an extreme sensitivity to negative evaluation.

Furthermore, individuals who grow up in an environment where social interactions are limited or where they are not encouraged to engage with others may fail to develop proper social skills, leading to social anxiety and avoidance in adulthood.

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Certain psychological factors can predispose individuals to developing AVPD. These may include low self-esteem, perfectionism and a high need for approval. People with AVPD often believe that they must be perfect to be accepted by others

and any perceived flaw or mistake feels catastrophic. This leads to a cycle of avoidance, as they try to prevent situations where their perceived shortcomings might be exposed.