



AID WORKER ANXIETY

THE NEGATIVE CYCLE
OF AVOIDANCE
BEHAVIOURS

THE CYCLE OF ANXIETY



ANXIETY: An anxiety-producing situation leads to uncomfortable symptoms such as worry, fear, a racing heart, sweating, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.



AVOIDANCE: Uncomfortable symptoms are controlled by avoiding the anxiety-producing situation. Examples of avoidance include:

- Skipping meetings to avoid giving a presentation.
- Using drugs or alcohol to numb feelings.
- Procrastinating on challenging tasks.



SHORT TERM RELIEF: Avoidance of the anxiety-producing situation gives an immediate sense of relief. The symptoms of anxiety lessen, but only temporarily.



LONG-TERM: The fear that initially led to avoidance worsens, and the brain learns that when the anxiety-producing situation is avoided, the symptoms go away. As a result, the symptoms of anxiety will be worse the next time, and avoidance is more likely.

Prioritising mental health support for aid workers can reduce turnover, improve productivity, and create a more resilient workforce. Untreated anxiety can lead to inhibited behaviours and negative coping mechanisms that worsen mental health.



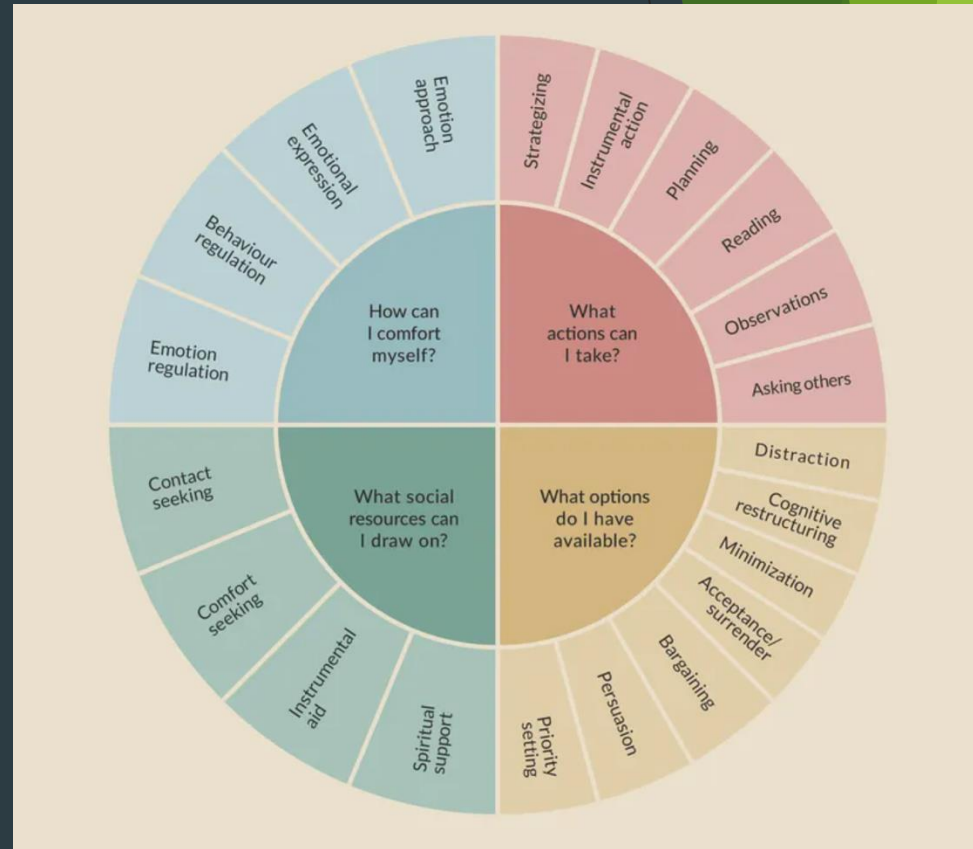
Common Anxiety Driven Avoidance Behaviours

- ▶ **Increased substance use (alcohol, drugs, tobacco):** While these may offer temporary relief, they can exacerbate anxiety in the long run and lead to dependence.
- ▶ **Social withdrawal and isolation:** Avoiding social interactions can worsen feelings of loneliness and anxiety and increase instances of negative thinking about the self and the world around.
- ▶ **Risk-taking behaviours:** Some individuals may engage in impulsive or risky behaviours, such as reckless driving, gambling, or unsafe sexual practices, as a way to cope with anxiety, potentially leading to harm.



An Adaptive Coping Approach

- ▶ **Acknowledge Your Anxiety:** Recognise that you're feeling anxious and that avoidance isn't the solution.
- ▶ **Start with the Easiest Question:** Look at the wheel and choose the most approachable question.
- ▶ **Reflect and Answer:** Consider the question, the possible behaviours from the wheel, and how these might translate into key actions or activities.
- ▶ **Continue Reflecting and Answering:** Keep moving around the wheel, answering each question as you go.
- ▶ **Gain Clarity:** By the end, you should have a clearer understanding of coping with the urge to avoid. You might have identified new strategies, different perspectives, or a better understanding of your emotions.



Additional Reading

- **Avoidance Coping and Why It Creates Additional Stress:**
<https://www.verywellmind.com/avoidance-coping-and-stress-4137836>
- **Healthy Coping: 24 Mechanisms & Skills For Positive Coping:**
<https://positivepsychology.com/coping/>
- **Avoidance: There's No Escaping Its Importance to Anxiety:**
<https://manhattancbt.com/avoidance/>
- **My-PWB – Anxiety and Aid Workers:**
<https://saagnew.wixsite.com/mypwb/about-6-1>