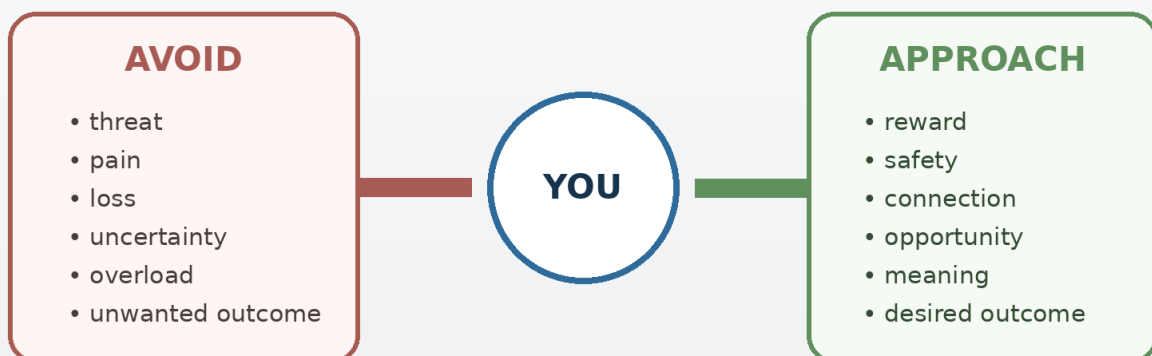


Lesson 1

Approach and Avoid: The Basic Human Decision

A free introductory lesson from ApproachAvoid.com

THE APPROACH / AVOID COMPASS



The same situation can pull one person toward it and push another person away.

**A simple question can open a much larger view of behavior:
What are we approaching, what are we avoiding, and why?**

This lesson is educational, not medical or psychological advice. Human behavior is complex; the approach/avoid lens is a useful starting framework, not a complete explanation.

1. The Big Idea

Every day, people make thousands of small and large movements toward some things and away from others. We accept an invitation, ignore a message, choose a familiar route, postpone a difficult task, seek reassurance, explore something new, leave an uncomfortable situation, or return to an experience we enjoyed.

One useful way to organize these actions is through **approach** and **avoidance**. In behavioral science, approach generally refers to movement toward desired, rewarding, meaningful, or potentially beneficial outcomes. Avoidance generally refers to movement away from threatening, painful, costly, uncertain, or unwanted outcomes.

These tendencies are not opposites in a simple on/off switch. A single situation can create both at once.

Example: A person may want a promotion because it offers higher pay and status, while simultaneously avoiding it because it could bring more responsibility, conflict, or uncertainty.

**Approach and avoidance can operate at the same time.
Much of real behavior is a negotiation among competing pulls.**

Why This Matters

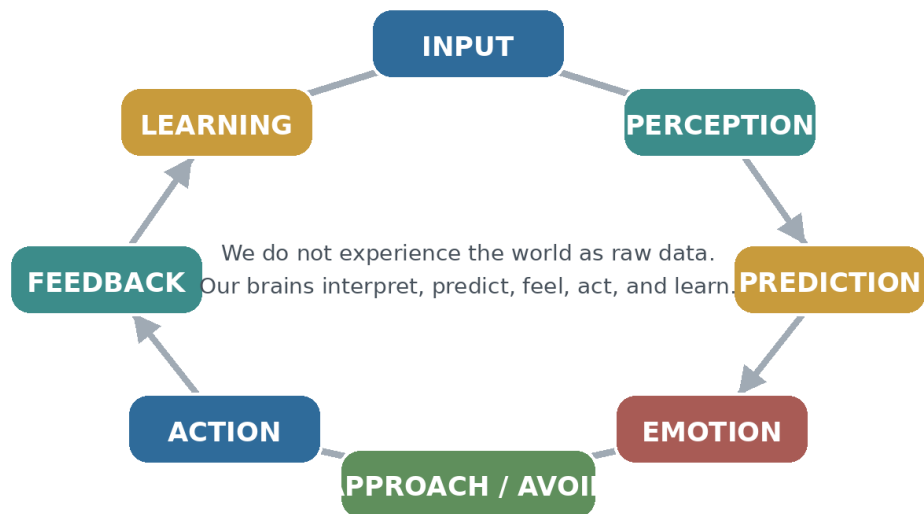
- It gives us a simple language for noticing behavior without immediately judging it.
- It encourages us to look beneath an action and ask what outcome a person expects.
- It helps connect individual behavior to customer experience, employee experience, social behavior, and adaptation to change.
- It creates a repeatable question we can use throughout the rest of this learning series.

2. We Do Not Respond to the World in Exactly the Same Way

Two people can experience the same event and respond very differently. That is because behavior is influenced by more than the event itself. Past learning, memory, expectations, current goals, bodily state, attention, social context, culture, perceived control, and many other factors can shape what a situation means to a person.

This is why a touchpoint that feels efficient to one customer may feel cold or confusing to another. A workplace change that feels exciting to one employee may feel threatening to another. A new technology can represent opportunity to one person and loss of control to someone else.

A SIMPLE BEHAVIOR LOOP



The diagram is intentionally simplified. Human brains do not move through these steps like a rigid assembly line. Perception, prediction, emotion, memory, and action influence one another continuously. The purpose of the loop is to give us a practical way to slow down and examine what may be happening.

A Better Question

Instead of asking only **“Why did that person do that?”**, try asking:

- What outcome might they be moving toward?
- What outcome might they be trying to avoid?
- What did they expect would happen?
- What information or experience may have shaped that expectation?

3. Approach Is More Than Pleasure. Avoidance Is More Than Fear.

It is tempting to think of approach as “good” and avoidance as “bad.” That would be misleading. Both can be adaptive, and both can sometimes create problems.

Pattern	Can Be Helpful	Can Become Costly
Approach	Exploration, learning, relationships, exercise, opportunity, creativity, seeking help.	Impulsivity, excessive risk-taking, overconsumption, chasing status or reward without considering costs.
Avoidance	Escaping danger, setting boundaries, preventing loss, declining harmful situations, conserving resources.	Procrastination, withdrawal, missed opportunities, avoiding useful feedback, reinforcing fear through repeated escape.

The important question is not simply “approach or avoid?” It is whether the behavior fits the person’s goals, values, circumstances, and longer-term consequences.

Approach-Avoid Conflict

Some of the most interesting decisions contain both attraction and resistance. We want the outcome and fear the cost. We want change and prefer familiarity. We want honest feedback and want to protect our self-image. We want connection and want privacy.

**When you feel “stuck,” look for competing approach and avoid forces.
The conflict may be part of the explanation.**

4. Try the Approach/Avoid Mindset for One Day

The best way to understand this framework is to use it. For one day, periodically pause and notice what you are doing.

Ask three questions:

1. What am I approaching?
2. What am I avoiding?
3. Why might that outcome matter to me?

Try it during ordinary moments:

- You open one email immediately and leave another unread.
- You choose a familiar meal instead of trying something new.
- You check your phone during a difficult task.
- You speak up in one meeting and stay quiet in another.
- You delay a purchase, conversation, appointment, or decision.
- You continue scrolling even though you intended to stop.
- You return to a store, website, restaurant, person, or activity you trust.

Do not turn the exercise into self-criticism. The first goal is simply to notice patterns.

Then Widen the Lens

After noticing your own behavior, try the same exercise with a situation involving another person. Do not claim to know what is inside their mind. Instead, generate possibilities:

- What might this person be trying to gain or protect?
- What might they perceive as costly, risky, embarrassing, uncertain, or threatening?
- What information would I need before I could be more confident?

This is where the Approach/Avoid Mindset connects with **Detached Observation**: step back first, then ask what may be pulling behavior toward or away.

5. From the Individual to Experiences and Society

The same lens can be applied at different scales. We should be cautious about treating a group as if it has one mind, but approach/avoid questions can still help organize what we observe.

SELF	What am I seeking, protecting, postponing, or escaping?
OTHER PEOPLE	What outcomes might another person value or fear? What evidence do I have?
EXPERIENCES	What makes a customer, patient, or employee want to return, trust, engage, complain, or leave?
ORGANIZATIONS	What opportunities is the organization pursuing? What losses or risks is it trying to prevent?
SOCIETY	What rewards, threats, identities, narratives, and changing conditions are influencing groups of people?

A Note About Society

When we apply the lens to politics, religion, culture, organizations, or large groups, we need extra humility. Group behavior can emerge from institutions, incentives, norms, power relationships, information systems, and many individuals with different motives. The Approach/Avoid framework can help us generate questions, but it should not be used to claim a hidden motive without evidence.

That habit - using the framework to ask rather than prematurely answer - will be important throughout the series.

6. Reflection Exercise

Choose one recent decision or reaction from your own life. It can be small. The purpose is observation, not diagnosis.

1. What happened?

Describe the situation as neutrally as you can.

2. What did you approach?

What outcome, feeling, person, information, or opportunity did you move toward?

3. What did you avoid?

What outcome, feeling, person, uncertainty, or cost did you move away from?

4. What did you expect?

What did you think would happen if you acted - or did not act?

5. What else might explain it?

List at least one alternative explanation for your behavior.

6. What did you learn?

Did the outcome reinforce the behavior or make you want to respond differently next time?

One Sentence to Remember

“Before I judge the behavior, I can ask what is being approached, what is being avoided, and what information I may still be missing.”

7. What Comes Next

Lesson 1 gives us the organizing lens. Future lessons can now explore the systems that shape what people approach and avoid.

The next foundational lessons will examine topics such as perception and the five senses, prediction and expectations, emotion, reward and threat, trust, attention, stress, identity, social behavior, and adaptation to change.

Core practice: Step back. Observe. Ask what is being approached or avoided. Stay curious about why.

Key Takeaways

- Approach and avoidance are useful organizing concepts for understanding behavior.
- The same event can generate approach for one person and avoidance for another.
- Approach is not automatically good, and avoidance is not automatically bad.
- Behavior often reflects competing motives and expected outcomes.
- The framework is most useful when it helps us ask better questions rather than claim certainty about another person's motives.
- Detached Observation and the Approach/Avoid Mindset work together: widen the view, then examine the pulls.

Selected Research Foundations

This introductory lesson is informed by established work on approach-avoidance motivation, reinforcement learning, affect, decision-making, and predictive processing. Suggested starting points include:

Elliot, A. J. (2006). The hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 30, 111-116.

Gray, J. A., & McNaughton, N. (2000). *The Neuropsychology of Anxiety*. Oxford University Press.

Carver, C. S., & White, T. L. (1994). Behavioral inhibition, behavioral activation, and affective responses to impending reward and punishment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(2), 319-333.

Friston, K. (2010). The free-energy principle: a unified brain theory? *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11, 127-138. (Useful for predictive-processing context; not a complete account of behavior.)

ApproachAvoid.com

Free learning for understanding ourselves, other people, society, and adaptation to change.