

CHAPTER FIVE

Overcoming the Phobia of Inner Experience

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Break
- Topic: Overcoming the Phobia of Inner Experience
 - Introduction
 - Understanding the Phobia of Inner Experience
 - Why People Develop a Phobia of Inner Experience
 - The Need to Overcome the Phobia of Inner Experience
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 5.1, Becoming Aware of Avoiding Inner Experience

Introduction

Our inner experience is that which we think, feel, remember, perceive, sense, decide, plan, and predict. These experiences are actually *mental actions*, or mental activity (Van der Hart et al., 2006). Mental activity, in which we engage all the time, may or may not be accompanied by behavioral actions. It is essential that you become aware of, learn to tolerate and regulate, and even change major mental actions that affect your current life, such as negative beliefs, and feelings or reactions to the past that interfere with the present. However, it is impossible to change inner experiences if you are avoiding them because you are afraid, ashamed, or disgusted by them. Serious avoidance of your inner

experiences is called *experiential avoidance* (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, & Follette, 1996), or the *phobia of inner experience* (Steele, Van der Hart, & Nijenhuis, 2005; Van der Hart et al., 2006). In this chapter you will learn about the phobia of inner experience and build a foundation of skills to overcome it.

Understanding the Phobia of Inner Experience

Most people think of phobias as a fear and avoidance of something external such as spiders, heights, or flying. But some people can be equally terrified of a feeling like rage or sadness, of a thought or wish, or a prediction that if they try something new it will fail, or even of physical sensations such as the rapid heart beat and difficulty breathing that accompany panic. Such a phobia of inner experience may involve shame or disgust in addition to fear (Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004; Van der Hart et al., 2006). The phobia of inner experience is a serious problem, contributing to ongoing psychological stress and inhibition of pleasant or spontaneous activities (Kashdana, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006).

For example, people may be intensely ashamed of feeling rage, because they believe that emotion could only belong to a “bad” person, or because they fear the consequences of expressing it. They feel enraged, and instead of being able to deal with the anger, they increase their misery by giving themselves negative labels: Their misery has thus become compounded. Subsequently, they avoid anger and situations that might evoke anger, and any time they begin to feel angry, they recoil in shame and disgust. Other people may have intense fantasies of being cared for, yet feel very afraid, ashamed, and disgusted by these wishes, because they have negative beliefs that being “needy” or “dependent” is weak and not normal, again creating more inner distress and preventing them from accepting important needs.

Many individuals with a dissociative disorder are afraid of inner voices that come from other parts of themselves. They label themselves as “crazy” and feel ashamed and afraid of these voices. Such feelings are sometimes intensified if they have been labeled psychotic or “crazy” by mental health professionals or others who did not understand the dissociative nature of the voices.

Some inner experiences may feel so threatening that almost any

means of avoidance or escape may be used, no matter how destructive. Perhaps you avoid your inner experience by working too much, so you do not have to pay attention to yourself, as Marilyn Van Derbur, a survivor of child abuse, noted: “That was my *survival mechanism*, staying so busy there was not time to have unthinkable memories surface” (2004, p. 45). Other avoidance behaviors might include using drugs or alcohol or other addictive behavior, increasing self-criticism, withdrawing from others, or blaming others for your inner problems. Of course, each dissociative part of yourself is a part of your inner experience that you likely avoid, even to the point of not feeling or knowing it is “your” experience.

Avoidance can be conscious or unconscious. We will begin by helping you be more aware of the ways in which you avoid inner experience in conscious ways. Once you become more comfortable in noticing how you consciously avoid your inner experience, you gradually can begin to feel more secure to focus on some inner experiences of which you may not yet be aware. For example, you may become more aware that you cringe and feel fear when you hear an inner voice, but you may not yet know much about why that voice exists or what that part of you experiences.

Why People Develop a Phobia of Inner Experience

Generally the phobia of inner experience develops for three different reasons. First, many people who were traumatized early in life did not get much help in learning how to understand and cope with typical intense inner experiences such as overwhelming emotions. They received too little help and reassurance from caretakers. Thus, they feel easily overwhelmed, simply because they do not understand these experiences and feel they are not controllable.

Second, people tend to evaluate their inner experience as “good” or “bad.” They go on to label themselves in the same way: “Anger is bad and dangerous, so if I feel anger, I must be bad and dangerous;” “Only people who are unlovable and worthless feel shame; so if I feel shame it means I am a failure and unlovable.” Of course, we all want what is good and pleasant, and we want to avoid what is painful, just as we want to be good people, not bad ones. But our inner experiences are not what make us good or bad;

they are just a natural part of everyone's internal world.

Finally, certain inner experiences serve as reminders of past traumatic experiences or as signals that something terrible is about to happen. For example, when people, or some dissociative parts of themselves, feel anxious, the emotion and physical sensations may immediately remind them, even if only on an unconscious level, of the fear they felt when they were being hurt in the past. They thus try to avoid feeling anxious so as not to be reminded of unresolved traumatic memories. Others might perceive an inner experience as a signal that something is about to go wrong. For instance, a person who feels sadness may believe or merely sense that this emotion precedes an overwhelming experience of despair, lack of comfort, and aloneness. Thus, sadness is avoided to prevent the other expected and really difficult experience from occurring. The painful paradox is that what is fearfully anticipated and avoided would not likely take place if the present feeling of sadness is accepted and calmly experienced.

The Need to Overcome the Phobia of Inner Experience

It is completely understandable that you might want to avoid certain inner experiences that are related to past traumatizing events. Yet healing requires you to work with these inner experiences in order to understand and change them. And you cannot change that which you avoid or do not know. Although it may be difficult, it is essential for you to learn how to accept, understand, regulate, and cope with all of your inner experiences.

Inner experiences have good reason to exist and should not be judged as "good" or "bad." Everyone has internal experiences; some are more congruent with who you want to be, others less so. Some are more comfortable, others are not. Some are more under your control, others occur spontaneously. All humans have this wide range of inner experiences. Everyone gets angry, feels afraid, ashamed, or incompetent at times. If you are able to tolerate those feelings and their accompanying thoughts and sensations, you can begin to learn to sit back and understand a bit more about them, and thus what to do about them. Otherwise you remain a captive of your inner experience, with *it* in control of *you*.

Your work in your therapy and with this manual can help you

learn to accept your inner experiences without judgment, including dissociative parts of yourself. In fact, this entire manual is geared toward helping you begin to overcome your phobia of various aspects of your inner experience and to feel less vulnerable and more comfortable as a whole person. You will learn much more about how to approach your inner experiences in the next chapter.

Homework Sheet 5.1

Becoming Aware of Avoiding Inner Experience

Each day this week try to notice a time when you consciously avoid some type of inner experience. You do not have to make yourself stop avoiding it, but just notice what you are avoiding and under what circumstances you avoid it. For example, perhaps you want to avoid a feeling of anger, a thought that things are hopeless, or the sound of a dissociative part crying or criticizing you.

Name one inner experience (emotion, thought, sensation, memory, fantasy, etc.) of which you are a little afraid or ashamed. Imagine that you put your fear or shame on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very little and 10 being very much. Choose an experience that is closer to 1 or 2, so that you will not get overwhelmed.

Complete the following questions for each day of the week:

1. What inner experience did you avoid or want to avoid?

2. What were your beliefs or concerns about what might happen if you allowed yourself to accept that inner experience?

3. What did you do to avoid the experience?

4. What help or resources do you imagine you might need in order to be less avoidant of this inner experience?

Example

1. I avoided feelings of sadness, I don't like to cry and I can't think when I am crying. There is a part of me inside that cries all the time. I hate hearing it. I just want to get away from that sound and feeling.
2. If I give in to being sad, I am afraid I will get so depressed that I cannot work. I'd like to get rid of that crying part of me. Nobody likes a crybaby.
3. I just worked and worked and kept busy all week so I didn't have time to think about it or feel anything.
4. I need help to feel safer with being sad. I am so afraid that I will never

stop crying.

Sunday

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday