



Essential Information

What is Avoidant Personality Disorder?

People diagnosed with Avoidant Personality Disorder (AvPD) may feel very uncomfortable in social situations because they may believe that other people will judge them harshly. They may also often worry about not being good enough as a person. These traits usually begin as significant shyness and difficulties coping with unfamiliar situations as a child. While for many children this resolves, for people with AvPD, these problems can get worse and lead to difficulties with work, study, and relationships for many years.

Avoidance of work and study due to fears of criticism

People with AvPD may struggle with occupational activities, like work or study, because of strong fears that they will be criticised or rejected. This could mean that they may not be able to reach their full potential. Because of these fears, they may decline offers of promotion or other opportunities that could help them to develop their skills. In some cases, people with AvPD may find it very difficult to go to work or their place of study and they might end up avoiding these places altogether. This can create problems as the avoidance may have negative consequences on their future work and education opportunities.

Relationship difficulties

Sustaining close relationships and managing social situations may be difficult for people with AvPD. Fears of disapproval may lead to misinterpretations of judgement from others. If they feel that someone is criticising them, even in a small way, they may feel extremely hurt. Sometimes, people with AvPD may worry that if someone criticises them they will react by crying or blushing. To protect from these worrying feelings, they may try to go unnoticed and avoid drawing attention to themselves.. People with AvPD may be particularly fearful about being around strangers and may only start a friendship when they can be absolutely certain that the other person likes them. Because of this, people with AvPD may feel lonely and not have a lot of social support.

Low self-esteem

People with AvPD often experience feelings of not being good enough and of something being wrong with who they are as a person. They may

be concerned that they are not valuable and experience feelings of deep shame. These feelings of low self-esteem may mean that a person with AvPD may stay in their “comfort zone”, preferring activities and situations that they are used to, so they can avoid feelings of embarrassment if they are rejected or humiliated. However, this can mean that people with AvPD may miss out on new experiences and relationships that may enrich their lives.

How common are these problems and why do they develop?

It is estimated that around 6.5% of the population experiences personality disorder problems, with a smaller number experiencing AvPD. The exact causes of AvPD are unknown but it is thought to involve several contributing factors, including:

- Vulnerability due to genetic factors (inherited from family)
- Significant shyness, fear of strangers, and difficulties adapting to unfamiliar situations during childhood
- Negative childhood experiences (e.g., neglect, loss)
- Anxiety during childhood/adolescence
- Ways of thinking and coping with feelings – often learnt during childhood and through experiences with other people

Can it be treated?

Yes, specialist psychological treatments provided by mental health professionals have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and improving quality of life. Taking active steps to get help may be difficult but essential. Support for family and partners may also be important. For treatment and support contact your local health service.

