

CONQUERING THE DIVIDE

All humans begin their lives connected to another. Healthy symbiosis between parent(s) and infant continues this link after the umbilical cord is cut. When contact with caretakers is absent or too painful, people must find ways to avoid their need for nurture:

- Avoidant people evade contact and rationalize their behavior. Intense mental activity becomes a refuge from people. They fantasize about relationships they secretly desire, talk about (intellectualize) their problems, or avoid painful subjects.
- Isolated people deny that they have wants. They split off internal neediness, which can surface under stress. They can be successful because achievement equals independence and safety from unmet needs. In relationships, they take a servile role to avoid attack. They may withdraw and shut down when others get too close.
- Eccentric people transfer the painful contact of their early years into the present and perceive a world filled with power and danger. To counter this, they endow themselves with unusual abilities (ESP, clairvoyance, mind reading) and develop rituals to undo “evil” forces.

Five or more items marked in any category below suggests that the self has cut its tether and has been set adrift from humankind.

Personality Types		
Avoidant Personalities¹	Isolated Personalities²	Eccentric Personalities³
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Avoid occupational activities that involve contact with others due to fear of rejection or disapproval (and become drifters). ___ Avoid involvement with people unless they are certain of being liked. ___ *Are restrained with people close to them due to fear of ridicule. ___ Are awkward in new situations because of feelings of inadequacy (and of being misfits). ___ In social situations, fear being criticized, rejected (or that people are against them). ___ See themselves as inept or unappealing. ___ Avoid new activities or personal risks due to fears of embarrassment. ___ Appear shy, withdrawn, or loyal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Lack close relationships and neither fear nor desire contact, even with family or partners. ___ *First-degree relatives may be their only friends or confidants. ___ Choose solitary activities almost always. ___ Enjoy few activities or none at all. ___ Have little interest in sex with others. ___ Can be indifferent to praise or criticism. ___ Talk in a loose, tangential, or forgetful way. ___ Appear cold, flat, aloof, or self-reliant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Share characteristics of isolated and avoidant personalities and are rarely at ease. ___ Think comments refer to them when they don't. Can be suspicious. ___ Have unusual beliefs: mind reading, superstitions, ESP, or magical ideas. ___ Have unusual perceptual experiences: body illusions, feeling spirits, sixth sense. ___ Have flat or inappropriate emotions. ___ Talk in vague, symbolic, or elaborate ways. ___ Appear odd, peculiar, unusual, or curious.
<p>¹ Adapted from criteria on p. 645 with permission from the <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>, 4th edition. Copyright 1994, American Psychiatric Association.</p> <p>² Ibid. p. 641.</p> <p>³ Ibid. pp. 664-665.</p>		

ORIGIN OF PROBLEMS

Avoidant people may have had good early nurturing, possibly reinforced by a reactive temperament that elicited caretaking. Later, they were humiliated in matters of being proper (“Who would want you?”) and ridiculed by siblings and peers. Thus, they have a taste of bonding but seek it only if

acceptance is assured. Isolated individuals may have been underreactive, “easy” babies that required or were offered little from withdrawn, formal caretakers. The message is “What do you want?” The experience of eccentrics is even more extreme. The greater the underreaction to environmental stimuli, the more mental activity is needed to fill the void. Abusive, controlling caretakers (“I know what you’re up to!”) may foster distorted thinking styles that defend against intrusions.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Decreasing avoidance, withdrawal, fantasy, intellectualizing, magical thinking, and rituals can seem like punching holes in a coat of armor. Even if your isolated existence feels comfortable, it leaves you trapped on the inside and unable to access life support at times when hurt cannot be pushed away. Awareness of distancing patterns is the first step. Use any difficult moments to identify what the situation means about you. If you often feel numb and empty, search your past for times when you were alive enough to feel pain.

Directions: Mark any of the thoughts you get in your worst moments. Then, identify beliefs you would like to have and affirm these new ideas regularly.	
Turn Defeating Thoughts into	... Beliefs That Promote Change
<input type="checkbox"/> I’m different, deficient, or unlikable, and . . . <input type="checkbox"/> I’ll be rejected, criticized, or embarrassed. <input type="checkbox"/> It’s foolish to risk devastating rejection. <input type="checkbox"/> I’m basically alone (and prefer it that way). <input type="checkbox"/> I don’t want the burden of a relationship. <input type="checkbox"/> People are needy and controlling. <input type="checkbox"/> I know what others think (about me). <input type="checkbox"/> I am the cause of bad things that happen. <input type="checkbox"/> If I cause my bad luck, I can control it. <input type="checkbox"/> Discomfort is caused by outside forces.	<input type="checkbox"/> I (can learn to) belong, fit in, make contact. <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproval does not equal rejection. <input type="checkbox"/> I can (learn to) handle rejection or criticism. <input type="checkbox"/> I can (learn to) enjoy contact with others. <input type="checkbox"/> I can find freedom in relationships. <input type="checkbox"/> People have good, appealing attributes. <input type="checkbox"/> I must ask questions to understand others. <input type="checkbox"/> I’m responsible only for my part (if at all). <input type="checkbox"/> I can (learn to) handle what I can’t control. <input type="checkbox"/> Discomfort is usually caused by my thoughts.

BEHAVIOR EXPERIMENTS

It will be easier to identify your defeating thoughts by intentionally creating situations that bring them to the surface. Pick any of the following exercises that sound hard or distasteful and, if possible, find a family member or friend to be your coach.

- Seek feedback from others about how your distancing affects them: children, spouses, or extended family. Log thoughts you have while hearing this input.
- List advantages and disadvantages of your relationship style. If you cannot think of disadvantages, seek ideas from people with satisfying, enjoyable lives.
- Pick a situation outside your “comfort zone” and imagine taking part in it. Notice any tension and count to three while inhaling and to six while exhaling until it passes. Claim your right to be accepted and participate in social situations until you’re at ease.
- Find positive aspects of any “flaws” you think you have. If you have a gap between your teeth, imagine using it to squirt water at people you don’t like. If your skin is pitted think of how you help people with one or two pimples feel better about themselves.
- Take a survey of people’s most embarrassing or humiliating moments. If necessary, write them down and review them when you fear public censure.
- Intentionally invite embarrassment or rejection. Ask where the lettuce is in a hardware store. Start a conversation or ask people for dates until you’ve had two rejections.
- Require yourself to make eye contact and say “Hello” once a day. Log any discomfort and gradually increase frequency of interaction. Practice with your coach.
- Test your “ESP”: Imagine what your coach is thinking and ask if you’re right. Take note of magical thoughts and say, “There I go trying to know (control) the unknown.”