

LETHAL AVOIDANCE

The young man said to me, "I'm an avoider." I said, "Tell me more." He said that whenever he expects someone will bark at him if he is truthful, he avoids being assertive, self-valuing, honest and self-disclosing. As an example, he anticipates anger from his grandfather if he tells his grandfather that he will not be home for dinner, so he does not tell him his plans. His solution to the problem of his grandfather's anger then becomes a new problem, as his grandfather feels ignored and disrespected.

On the plus side of the ledger, the young man revealed that he is improving daily in being forthright. He says he feels more whole and proud of himself.

Most all of us suffer from some degree or level of avoidance. It could take the form of procrastination or deep-seated denial. Even if the specific avoidance is relatively minor, I label them "lethal" because it will eventually "kill" you in some way.

Let's examine some illustrations of this potentially lethal malady and some strategies or steps to eliminate avoidance, regardless of how miniscule or gigantic it may be.

SOME EXAMPLES

We know a couple that butt heads endlessly because he likes to call people on the telephone and she is vehemently opposed. What are the underlying issues? He savors connecting with friends. She believes that telephoning disturbs or irritates people. The solution? He must strengthen his self-valuing to become less dependent upon affirmations from others. She must change her cognitive stance from "we will disturb them" to "they may feel delighted to hear from us."

A friend's son recently got a traffic ticket for driving while intoxicated. He suffered from Lethal Avoidance in that he had procrastinated about repairing a twisted rear bumper on his car. The police officer first noticed the unsightly twisted bumper but then noticed erratic driving. An ounce of action in regard to the twisted rear bumper would have probably avoided a DUI.

Avoidance comes in all shapes and sizes. Only in living fearlessly will we free ourselves from avoidance. We are generally highly skilled in rationalizing our avoidances. Sometimes we may be totally unaware of avoiding.

A man told me he did not realize it was abnormal to avoid going to the dentist when he knew he had a painful hole in his tooth. Growing up in his family, avoiding the dentist was an accepted norm.

Sometimes fear keeps us from acting. We anticipate with great clarity and accuracy how the other person will react so we do not initiate a needed action. This frequently happens when one spouse desires a divorce but the other spouse does not.

Lethal Avoidance occurs whenever we think of something we need to do, would like to do, want to do, but we push it down and do our best to ignore it until it

pops up again. To be self-masterful, we need to do it right away if possible or write it to down with when we will do it and then DO IT!!

ACTION STEPS

The first step in overcoming the Lethal Avoidance habit is to tune into or notice what I am avoiding. Generally this will require some down time or quiet time. Nature intrinsically moves toward healing or wholeness. When we stop to connect with ourselves the issues that need facing and resolving will bubble up into awareness. Ideally, this self-examination is done daily.

Once we connect with the issue or issues we are avoiding, the next step is to ask ourselves what is the real issue or underlying issue that keeps me paralyzed or frozen? Your answer or truth is within you. Your answer is the only valid answer. The underlying or real issue might be a firmly held belief or cognitive stance, a fear, low self-valuing, et cetera.

As an example of this second step, please consider the story of 27 year-old Bob with a history of chronic mild headaches occurring every day since middle school when he accidentally banged his head on a dumpster door while at school. Bob manages his mild pain by ignoring the ever-present pain while focusing on whatever task is present for him. When asked if he had ever visited a medical doctor for evaluation and treatment, he replied in the negative. He did reveal that about twice a year he has severe headache pain. He has excellent medical insurance. He is very intelligent and very professionally accomplished. After lengthy self-examination he revealed that he has avoided medical care because he distrusts medical doctors. His cognitive stance precludes treatment.

The third step is identifying what I need to do to end my Lethal Avoidance. Again, the only valid answer is your answer. Certainly there are 100,000 correct or workable answers you could obtain from outside of yourself. But the central idea here is for you to develop an "internal locus of control," i.e. to believe in yourself and trust yourself.

The last step, the fourth one, is to implement or initiate your decision. When will I do it? Where will I do it? What will I do? How often will I do it? Who will I do it with? Who will I rehearse with? If ultimately you feel powerless, enlist a friend or see a psychotherapist.

BOTTOM LINE

Please stop and realize the plus side. Once you overcome your Lethal Avoidance, life will be so much more pleasant for you. No more regrets. No more conflict. No more embarrassment. Your stomach will no longer churn and tighten, as you are untrue to yourself. You will sleep soundly at night. You will enjoy getting out of bed and facing each new exciting, rewarding day! Look on the bright side! Practicing Lethal Avoidance is burdensome and unpleasant; eliminating it is joyful, liberating, mood elevating and energy producing.