



Does Your Character Have Avoidant Personality Disorder?

A Writer's Workbook

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Meet Suzy, our guest character for this workbook. She's felt this anxiety for as long as she can remember. It's always there at the back of her mind—the fear of rejection, of criticism, of humiliation, so strong that it smothers her when she's around others. The only way she knows how to deal with it is avoidance.

Anxiety and inhibiting herself around others defined Suzy's childhood and adolescence, but it was only when she was older that she found out a name for what she had felt all her life: avoidant personality disorder (AvPD).

What Is Avoidant Personality Disorder?

AvPD is a **Cluster C personality disorder** characterised by its pattern of social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation.

Observers typically describe people with AvPD as shy, timid and lonely, but that doesn't mean that these people want to be isolated. In fact, they often desire affection and acceptance, fantasising about idealised relationships with others; their fear of rejection gets in the way of forming these relationships, however. It's this fear and anxiety around social situations and interactions with others that can cripple people with AvPD in occupational and personal settings.

DIAGNOSING PERSONALITY DISORDERS

What to Keep in Mind

Remember: personality disorders are **pervasive, enduring** and cause **distress**. That means:

1 | Your character's thoughts, feelings and behaviours affect different areas of her life. They don't come and go, depending on the situation, or only show up in certain circumstances. They're pervasive and inflexible.

2 | The characteristic features your character experiences endure over time. So, if your character has a brief, one-off episode of certain symptoms, she wouldn't be classed as having a personality disorder.

3 | Personality disorders can impair your character in some way or stop her doing certain things. They can also cause psychological distress. In other words, your character's feelings are troubled, confused or out of the ordinary—not a pleasant situation to be in.

To be diagnosed with avoidant personality disorder, your character must display **four or more** of the seven characteristic features covered over the next few pages. Which of the features does your character experience?

Important to Note

The information in this guide comes from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5). It **should not** be used to diagnose yourself or others, nor is it intended to be a substitute for professional advice. If you have any questions about the diagnostic criteria in relation to yourself or others, please consult a qualified clinical professional.

Feel free to use this information to diagnose your characters, however. That's what I made this workbook for!

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 1

Avoiding occupational activities that require significant contact with others for fear of criticism, disapproval or rejection.

The root of this characteristic feature is your character's fear of negative evaluation. It's this feeling that causes her to avoid certain situations, like occupational activities, or take personal risks (see Criterion 7).

If she experiences this criterion, she may avoid jobs that need her to interact with others a lot or even turn down job promotions, as her new responsibilities could result in criticism from her co-workers. This avoidance gives a sense of security, but can seriously restrict your character's lifestyle and career.

AvPD & Development

Shyness in children isn't unusual. In most cases, that shyness gradually dissipates as they grow up, allowing them to build relationships with new people.

In individuals with AvPD, however, the shyness they feel in childhood tends to get worse in adolescence and early adulthood, which can encourage them to avoid others at a time when forming relationships is particularly important. Keep this in mind if you decide to write about a character with AvPD.

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 2

Being unwilling to become involved with people unless she's certain of being liked.

If your character meets this criterion, she holds back from making friends unless she's certain she'll be liked and accepted by them. She's unlikely to join in group activities unless the members give repeated and generous offers of support—but it could well be that groups stop inviting her after the first few times she turns them down. Keep in mind the isolation—and the conflict—that could cause.

Your character may also assume that other people are disapproving and critical, until they've passed stringent tests that prove otherwise. Again, these people may give up on trying to reach out to her before that happens. Don't forget to consider how observers could interpret her behaviour—as overly suspicious, insulting even, especially if their intentions are pure and honest.

AvPD & Other Disorders

Avoidant personality disorder has similar features to other mental health disorders and can co-occur with them, but it's important to know how AvPD differs from other anxiety and personality disorders before you write about them (you don't want to mistakenly mix up their characteristics, after all). We'll take a brief look over the next few pages.

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 3

Showing restraint in intimate relationships due to the fear of being exposed, shamed or ridiculed.

Though the characteristics of avoidant personality disorder suggest a solitary life, with few relations, intimate relationships are indeed possible if your character is assured of uncritical acceptance. However, the deep-seated fear of having her secrets exposed and made fun of could cause your character to hold back in the close relationships she does have.

How might you show that in your story? Your AvPD character may try to turn the conversation back to her partner if any personal topics are broached and, though she may talk to her friends and loved ones, she won't necessarily open up to them about personal issues. Other characters, particularly those in close relationships with her, may interpret her behaviour as cold or feel that there's a wall between them.

AvPD & Anxiety

There's a lot of overlap between avoidant personality disorder and social anxiety disorder (i.e., social phobia). In fact, the DSM admits that they may well be different conceptualisations of the same or similar conditions.

What does that mean for you? If you have a character with AvPD, read up on social anxiety disorder too—many of the characteristic features may correspond.

Avoidant personality disorder can also co-occur with agoraphobia, depressive and bipolar disorders.

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 4

Being preoccupied with thoughts of criticism or rejection in social situations.

These thoughts, always at the back of her mind, can weigh your character down and wear her out. This preoccupation can plague her so much that it negatively affects her interactions with others, her performance at work, even her physical health (anxiety is *not* good for the body).

When your character first meets someone, she may immediately interpret him as forming a critical opinion of her. Remember: your POV (point-of-view) character's perceptions don't have to be accurate, so don't shy away from colouring her narrative with her biases. Her assessment of a person could well be very different to other POV characters'.

It's also likely that your character will vigilantly assess others for signs of disapproval or criticism, being highly sensitive to their body language and facial expressions. Even slight signals of negative evaluation can make her feel extremely hurt.

Avoidant & Dependent Personality Disorders

Both of these personality disorders are characterised by feelings of inadequacy, a hypersensitivity to criticism and a burning need for reassurance.

Where do they differ? In their primary concern. While the focus of AvPD is on avoiding humiliation and rejection, the focus of dependent personality disorder is on being taken care of.

Often, the two will be diagnosed together, as individuals with AvPD can become very dependent on the select few people they're friends with. You can find out more about dependent personality disorder [here](#).

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 5

Being inhibited in new interpersonal situations because of her feelings of inadequacy.

An AvPD character may be described as ‘shy’ and ‘solitary’ by observers because of this inhibition in social situations, but that description doesn’t get to the heart of *why* she acts this way—because she feels inadequate.

She may be worried that she’ll say something that others will mock or criticise her for, or behave in a way that causes her embarrassment. To make sure that doesn’t happen, she may keep to herself or steer the conversation away from personal matters. These feelings of inadequacy can cause your AvPD character’s self-esteem to plummet, which can reflect in other areas of her life too.

Avoidant, Schizoid & Schizotypal Personality Disorders

Schizoid and schizotypal personality disorders (part of Cluster A) are characterised by social isolation, as is AvPD.

These two differ from avoidant personality disorder in their intent, however. People with schizoid or schizotypal personality disorder are content with—or even prefer—their social isolation, while people with AvPD feel their loneliness keenly and want relationships with others. It’s their intense fear of rejection and criticism that gets in the way.

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 6

Viewing herself as socially inept, personally unappealing or inferior to others.

These negative thoughts and feelings become particularly apparent when interacting with strangers. Your character may feel clumsy and incapable in social situations, like when meeting someone for the first time at a party, or inferior to others, deeming these people more likeable, skilled and socially adept than her. She may also feel that she's personally unappealing and unlikeable, questioning the motives behind positive comments she receives or kind behaviour towards her.

Avoidant & Paranoid Personality Disorders

While both AvPD and paranoid personality disorder (also part of Cluster A) feature a reluctance to confide in others, the distinction lies in the reason for this reluctance.

People with avoidant personality disorder fear being embarrassed or judged as inadequate and so avoid confiding in others, whereas people with paranoid personality disorder fear others' malicious intent.

DIAGNOSING AvPD

Criterion 7

Being reluctant—unusually so—to take personal risks or take part in any new activities as they might prove embarrassing.

There's being reluctant to get up in front of your dance class to demonstrate a move because you're afraid of being embarrassed. Then there's being reluctant to even join the dance class because you're afraid you'll be embarrassed by not dressing appropriately or saying the right words or acting in the right way.

Key here is being prone to exaggerating potential dangers of ordinary situations. This could make your character unwilling to engage in new activities and restrict her lifestyle as a result, all for this need for certainty and security.

AvPD & Other Personality Disorders

Because disorders can co-occur, your character *can* be diagnosed with more than one personality disorder if he or she meets the criteria for each (e.g., avoidant and **borderline** personality disorders can co-occur).

Just make sure the characteristic features fit together and have a basis in reality before you decide which disorders you'll have co-occur.

The Moral of the Story...

Avoidant personality disorder isn't as simple as being shy and avoiding others, as our guest character Suzy showed. If you want to write about it accurately, sensitively and subtly, make sure you're a well-informed writer. Completing this workbook is step one. Step two is doing more of your own research. Then go dig into that story, dear writer.

Want more information on this topic? Head over to the [Personality Disorder](#) series on Writerology or check out the references below.

Information Station

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