



The Many Forms of Avoidance

I have written a number of articles about the function of avoidance and its connection with anxiety. This has been a topic in many behavioral articles because it is so prevalent in the population with FXS. Often, avoidance is linked with aggressive behavior, especially in those who are more impacted by the FX gene and those who carry the burden of significant anxiety. The fact that they are unable to process and successfully reduce their anxiety causes them to respond to it in an aggressive manner just to avoid or quickly “get over” the feeling.

This article examines the issue of avoidance and posits a variety of ways it manifests in those with FXS, through a wide spectrum of affectedness.

Avoidance does in fact serve the purpose of escape—or at least of prolonging the inevitable. Usually the individual with FXS avoids something that is novel and unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Not having prior experience with a specific situation, person or activity becomes so aversive to them that it is difficult for parents or caregivers to coax their cooperation.

The level of a person’s affectedness tends to dictate the sophistication level of the response. For example, a male with significant affectedness may hit someone to avoid a specific event. A less affected female who may be afraid to initiate a telephone call, rather than simply refusing to call, will do so at a time when she knows the other party is away from home so that she can leave a message and not have to talk directly to the person. It may be inevitable that she will eventually receive a call back, but that is not her immediate concern. The motivation is to avoid the initial contact. In either case, the situation can leave much regret and even shame in its wake.

Avoidance behavior can range from physical aggression to shyness, exaggerating, excuse-making, lying, or physical absence. Understanding how these behaviors are linked to avoidance has been extensively studied in those who are more significantly affected because the behaviors are more overt and dangerous than other more subtle avoidance behaviors. It is, however, just as important to understand how less overt

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behaviors become coping mechanisms for those less affected by the Fragile X gene. Providing such understanding and tying it to more adaptive strategies is essential to these individuals’ ability to function and gain access to a less restrictive community.

Often, avoidance behaviors can be so subtle that their significance is lost. There are times that the excuse-making can become so habituated that those hearing the excuses lose perspective

and regard the person making them as dishonest and untrustworthy. Avoidance can thus spiral in others’ eyes from a mere manifestation of anxiety into a character flaw innate to the subject’s personality. This is tragic for those who have simply engaged in these behaviors as a coping mechanism to mitigate their fear and anxiety. Because the behavior is subtle and complex, it can be misapprehended, preventing it from being targeted as a behavior requiring strategic intervention.

Many individuals with FXS try to avoid disappointing others around them. This creates such intense feelings that their need to avoid overrides any concern about the consequences that may follow. For example, a person might disregard rules that lying and exaggeration are wrong because the need to please someone is stronger. The intensity of the feelings associated with disappointing others drives the behavior.

It is not unusual for me to be consulted about individuals with FXS who have made purchases for friends using family credit cards, or who have taken things from the family home in order to keep a friend. Myriad outcomes can result from this behavior.

Although it is important to remediate aggressive behavior, the more subtle attempts to avoid unpleasant matters sometimes have more far-reaching consequences. It is not uncommon for females with FXS to become so anxious that they are unable to leave their homes, participate in social events, drive, attend school or even eat or sleep. The end result can be just as harmful as a physical outburst, and it ultimately must be resolved.

BEHAVIORAL MANIFESTATION OF ANXIETY	
Anxiety ↓ Avoidance	
OVERT	SUBTLE/LESS OVERT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting others • Self-abuse • Running • Throwing things • Destroying property • Cursing/yelling, etc. • Crying • Refusals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lying • Making excuses • Exaggerating • Hiding • Staying home (agoraphobic) • Somaticizing* • Withdrawal

**to mistake emotional pain for a physical symptom.*

An essential difference between these two types of responses is that overt behaviors require assistance from the environment or another person to provide the reprieve from the situation that is creating the anxiety. The remedy is simple because it is based on teaching the individual with FXS how to show and talk about the anxiety. Providing alternative replacement behaviors is the last step in the process of remediation. Once the person with FXS accesses more acceptable ways to deal with anxiety, it is easy to teach replacement behaviors that will garner a more positive outcome.

The less overt responses can be much more difficult to modify because they are more closely aligned with socially

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appropriate behavior and harder to target with immediate certainty. For example, a person hiding from unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences is much easier for others to ignore than is another person who is biting his own arm. Overt and unusual

behaviors always garner the lion's share of attention.

It is also more difficult to link the behavior with the avoidance function in the case of the less overt behaviors. In addition, the person with FXS has often learned how to incorporate the behaviors into his or her personal repertoire, which tends to be accepted as a character flaw, which in turn allows for more slack to be cut. Such flaws can actually be perceived as charming—behavioral quirks that all people exhibit to one degree or other.

It can also be more difficult for the individual to accept remedial therapy for subtle avoidance behavior, because therapy may be perceived as intrusive. The person may have a higher level of skill development and therefore will use more subtle ways to fight the intervention, replacing one avoidance behavior with another until the pressure to change is removed.

The problem of avoidance in those with FXS will not be solved in this article, but it is important to paint the avoidance behaviors with a broader brush, including those that are less overt. The need to understand the function of these behaviors—whether overt or subtle—is critical in the management and remediation of avoidance. ☞

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different in the halls of Congress this year. There seemed to be a recognition, a knowing, an understanding—and a new willingness to listen. We are genuinely hopeful that this will translate into increased funding for research and programming and an accelerated pace of the already exciting research

toward more effective targeted treatments for FXD. You, too, can be a part of this. The next Advocacy Day is less than a year from now (March 2010). **Plan on joining us!** ☞

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