The Trap of Digging: ACT and Professional Avoidance

Psychologists know avoidance well. We teach clients how avoidance can provide short-term relief while creating longer-term problems.

The same process can happen in our professional lives.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy offers a useful way to understand this pattern. When difficult internal experiences show up, we may try to get rid of them rather than make room for them. We may avoid, distract, suppress, procrastinate, or move away from discomfort.

For psychologists, that might look like putting off difficult documentation, avoiding consultation, delaying a difficult conversation, or avoiding a clinically challenging case.

THE DIGGING METAPHOR

Imagine being at the bottom of a hole. You are anxious, ashamed, frustrated, or overwhelmed. You pick up a shovel because you want out.

You start digging.

The shovel makes sense in the moment. But every time you dig, the hole gets deeper.

That is experiential avoidance.

WHAT CAN DIGGING LOOK LIKE?

- Avoiding a colleague because a conversation feels uncomfortable
- Postponing notes because a session was difficult
- Avoiding consultation because we fear being judged
- Saying yes to everything so we do not disappoint anyone
- Withdrawing when overwhelmed
- Using substances or other behaviors to escape distress
- Avoiding a client population because a case triggers difficult personal feelings

The problem is not wanting relief. The problem is when the strategy provides short-term relief while moving us farther from what matters.

THREE QUESTIONS

1. What am I feeling right now?

Name the experience without immediately trying to fix it.

2. What am I doing to get away from this feeling?

Notice the behavior and whether it is helping in the long term.

3. What action would move me toward the kind of psychologist I want to be?

That action may be small: make the consultation call, complete the note, set the boundary, take the day off, or ask for help.

VALUES OVER PERFECTION

Values give us direction even when circumstances are difficult.

Never make a mistake is not a realistic professional goal.

Practice with integrity is a value.

Never feel overwhelmed is unrealistic.

Respond to stress in a way that supports professional responsibilities is a value.

Mindfulness, acceptance, values clarification, and committed action can therefore become practical self-care tools.

A useful professional question is: Am I moving toward something that matters, or am I digging my way away from discomfort?

Sometimes the most values-consistent action is to stop digging and ask for help.

Resources: APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Standards 2.01 and 2.06.

Note: This article is educational and is not legal advice. Psychologists should consult current North Carolina law, Board guidance, and the APA Ethics Code for questions about their individual practice.