

Safety Behaviors

Safety behaviors are actions carried out with the intention of preventing a feared catastrophe. In the short-term they often give a sense of relief, but in the long-term they are unhelpful because they prevent the disconfirmation of the beliefs that are maintaining anxiety.

What is a catastrophe?

Catastrophes can vary enormously, but tend to be about different kinds of threats to the individual, for example:

- Physical threat - *"I'll be killed", "I'll be hurt"*
- Psychological threat - *"I'll go mad", "I can't cope"*
- Social threat - *"I'll embarrass myself and never be able to show my face again", "They will think I'm an idiot"*

What types of safety behaviors are there?

There are three types of safety behaviors:

1. *Avoidance* - e.g. not going to a feared situation
2. *Escape* - e.g. leaving a feared situation
3. *Subtle avoidance*, which can include things we do in our minds - e.g.
 - distraction - counting in my head during a panic to stop myself from going mad
 - calming my breathing - otherwise I'll be overwhelmed by my fear and lose control
 - averting my eyes - in case someone picks on me and I'm humiliated

What are the effects of safety behaviors?

- *Short term*: In the short term safety behaviors lead to a reduction in anxiety. Any form of escape or avoidance is often accompanied by a powerful feeling of relief. Relief is powerful negative reinforcer, and once an individual has learned that a safety behavior leads to relief they are likely to use it again.
- *Long term*: In the longer term, safety behaviors act to maintain anxiety by preventing the disconfirmation of unhelpful beliefs. For example, if someone has the belief *"dogs will attack me and bite my face"* and avoids dogs, they don't get the opportunity to learn that most dogs are friendly, or fail to learn the difference between friendly and unfriendly dogs.
- *Unintended consequences*: Safety behaviors often have unintended consequences which can reinforce the original belief, make the anxiety worse, or lead to other problems.

| Early experience | Belief | Safety behavior | Consequences | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| | | | Short term | Long term | Unintended |
| Humiliated at school about appearance | If people see my armpits they will think I am disgusting and reject me | Keep arms at my sides | Reduction in anxiety because no-one can see my armpits | No opportunities to learn that most people don't even notice sweat | Keeping arms at my sides makes armpits sweat even more |
| Physically assaulted by a group of men while walking home | People are dangerous, if I make eye contact I will be attacked | Avert my eyes to avoid eye contact | Feel slightly safer when around people | Fail to learn that eye contact does not generally lead to being attacked | People think that I am odd |
| Many experiences of unwanted attention by men, and an experience of sexual assault | The attacks were my fault, if I don't look conventionally attractive then I won't get attacked again | Overeat, pay less attention to my appearance | Feels good to be acting in accordance with my beliefs - feel a bit safer at times | No opportunities to learn that attacks were not my fault, and that not all unwanted attention is a precursor to an attack | Unconventional appearance may lead to more unwanted attention |

What is the difference between a safety behavior and adaptive behavior?

Just by looking at the behavior itself, there is no way of telling the difference between an unhelpful safety behavior and a helpful adaptive behavior. It is the *intention* which matters - safety behaviors are those which are *intended* to avert a feared catastrophe. For example, if the strategy of distraction is used to cope with a painful experience (e.g. a visit to the dentist) we say it is helpful. However, if distraction is used with the *intention* of preventing a catastrophe (e.g. to avoid a feeling of panic that I fear will make me go mad) then it can be viewed as an unhelpful safety behavior.