

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Safety Behaviors



Description

Safety-seeking behaviors are a response to a feared catastrophe. In situations that are perceived as dangerous people naturally act to keep themselves safe (and even have automatic evolved responses to promote safety – think ‘fight or flight’). Unfortunately, while safety behaviors can lead to a feeling of relief in the short term (and are thus reinforced), they have the effect of reinforcing beliefs about threat, lead to beliefs going unchallenged, or lead to other unintended consequences.

The *Safety Behaviors* worksheet is a CBT worksheet providing a clear and comprehensive explanation of safety behaviors. It is essential for clients to have a strong understanding of the causes and consequences of safety behaviors if they are to be experimented with and relinquished.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout.

Suggested uses include:

- Client handout – a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – to provoke a discussion and explore your client’s beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – to improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Supervision tool – to develop formulations and knowledge.
- Teaching resource – a learning tool during training.

References

Salkovskis, P. M. (1991). The importance of behaviour in the maintenance of anxiety and panic: a cognitive account. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 19(1), 6-19.

Rachman, S., Radomsky, A. S., Shafran, R. (2008). Safety behaviour: A reconsideration. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 46(2), 163-173

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.

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Resource details

Title: Safety Behaviors
 Type: Information Handout
 Language: English (US)
 Translated title: Safety Behaviors

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/safety-behaviors>
 Resource format: Professional
 Version: 20230721
 Last updated by: JP

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