

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Are Safety Behaviors?



Description

Salkovskis (1997) argues that anxiety poses a paradox: “Why do people suffering from anxiety fail to benefit from the repeated experience of surviving anxiety-provoking situations unharmed?”. Put another way, why does someone “continue to fear a catastrophe that repeatedly fails to materialise?” (Seligman, 1988).

Safety-seeking behaviors (‘safety behaviors’) are actions that people take in response to a real – or perceived – threat. When a threat is real, safety-seeking behaviors are helpful (adaptive). Stepping out of the way of a speeding car, leaving a burning building, or attending hospital when faced with a medical emergency are all actions which can save your life. However, if a misinterpretation leads an individual to perceive a threat in the absence of real danger, safety-seeking behaviors can prevent the anxious individual from learning about the (true) absence of danger:

“Inappropriate seeking of safety can prevent the anxious person from discovering that their fears are groundless. After an episode that should have established that the feared consequence did not happen, persons engaged in active safety behaviors may believe they had a lucky escape because they did things that prevented the feared catastrophe from occurring.”

(Salkovskis, 1997).

Safety-seeking behaviors are prevalent in many clinical problems. The chosen safety strategy is closely linked to the individual’s concern, and acts to maintain the threat-related belief:

- **Someone suffering from panic** might carry a bottle of water when traveling by train to prevent the feared catastrophe of choking. The non-occurrence of choking might be attributed to the use of water. (e.g., “My throat didn’t close up because I kept taking sips of water.”)

- **Someone struggling with social anxiety** might stay silent to avoid the feared catastrophe of ridicule. The non-occurrence of humiliation might be attributed to their use of silence. (e.g., “Nobody laughed at me because I kept myself to myself.”)
- **Someone suffering from PTSD** might prevent the feared catastrophe of inviting another personal attack by avoiding eye contact with men. Non-occurrence of attack might be attributed to their safety strategy. (e.g., “I wasn’t attacked because I was careful.”)
- **Someone suffering from OCD** might prevent the feared catastrophe of infecting their family with HIV by being careful to avoid anything that looks like dried blood. The non-occurrence of the feared infection might be attributed to this caution. (e.g., “My family are safe because I was careful”.)

Understanding safety-seeking behaviors has important treatment implications. Rather than relying on exposure (which can be made less effective by the use of safety behaviors) to provide disconfirmation of a threat, behavioral experiments can be designed to provide experiences which directly disconfirm threat beliefs. For example, someone who panics that they would choke on the train can be encouraged to take a train journey without their bottle of water, in order to find out whether their throat will close up. A person fearing ridicule in a lecture can be encouraged to ask a question, to test whether it will happen. Similarly, a person with PTSD can be encouraged to make eye contact when speaking to a stranger, to test whether it provokes an attack.

The *What Are Safety Behaviors?* information handout can be used to introduce clients to the concept of safety-seeking behaviors, their short-term advantages, and their long-term effects.

Instructions

Suggested Question



When people are anxious about something bad occurring, they often do things to prevent that bad thing from happening. Do you do anything like that? Psychologists have a name for these actions you take – they are called ‘safety-seeking behaviors’ or ‘safety behaviors’. What do you make of the things that these anxious people are doing?

References

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Salkovskis, P. M. (Ed.). (1997). *Frontiers of cognitive therapy*. Guilford Press.

Seligman, M. E. P. (1988). Competing theories of panic. In: S. Rachman & J. D. Maser (Eds.), *Panic: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 321–329). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

What Are Safety Behaviors?

Do you ever worry that something bad – or a catastrophe – might happen?

I'm worried about having a panic attack in front of other people.



I worry that I'll get contaminated and it will end up harming my family.



I worry that I'm going to go blank in conversation and look stupid.



Do you do anything to prevent that catastrophe from happening? These are your **safety behaviors**.

I always sit near the door so that I can make a quick exit.



I wear gloves whenever I am out.



I rehearse conversations, and make notes about topics that I could talk about.



In the short-term, your safety behaviors might make you feel less anxious.

It feels better to know that I've got an escape if I need it.



I feel safe as long as I've got my gloves on.



Practicing makes me feel prepared.



In the long-term, safety behaviors stop you from learning whether your catastrophe would really happen. They can create problems of their own, and sometimes they can amplify the thing you are trying to prevent.

It makes it hard to be anywhere where I can't escape easily. I don't go on trains anymore, and I don't like going to the movies.



My family are OK, but that's only because I take such care not to let any germs in the house. It's exhausting living like this, and I see germs everywhere.



Conversations don't flow very well, and it's hard to feel close to people. I still worry that I come across as stupid.



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