Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Are Safety Behaviors?



PSYCHOLOGY**TO&LS**®

Description

Salkovskis (1997) argues that anxiety poses a paradox: "Why do people suffering from anxiety fail to benefit from the repeated experience of surviving anxietyprovoking 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 threatrelated 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. Nonoccurrence 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 safetyseeking 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

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.

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?

Customer ID cus_Oq8

een on 2023-11-04 at 23:47:48.

PSYCHOLOGY**TO&LS**®

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



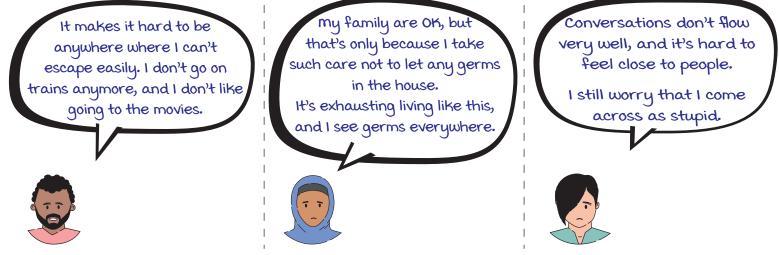
Do you do anything to prevent that catastrophe from happening? These are your safety behaviors.



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



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.



About us

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skillsdevelopment resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



Resource details

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

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

Terms & conditions

This resource may be used by licensed members of Psychology Tools and their clients. Resources must be used in accordance with our terms and conditions which can be found at: https://www.psychologytools.com/terms-and-conditions/

Disclaimer

Your use of this resource is not intended to be, and should not be relied on, as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are suffering from any mental health issues we recommend that you seek formal medical advice before using these resources. We make no warranties that this information is correct, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. As a professional user, you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

Copyright

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is Copyright © 2023 Psychology Tools Limited. All rights reserved.