

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 belief that one is in danger

What is a catastrophic belief?

Catastrophic beliefs are usually, but not always, 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 clean my face again"/"They will look for an idiot"

What types of safety behaviors are there?

There are three types of safety behaviors:

1. Avoidance - e.g. refusing to go back to a location
2. Dodge - e.g. leaving a feared situation
3. Safety behaviors - which are subtle things one does to decrease anxiety - e.g.
 - distraction - wanting to go back to a safe place to stop myself from progressing
 - covering my breathing - otherwise I'll be overwhelmed by my fear and lose control
 - bracing my feet - in case someone picks me up or I'm assaulted

What are the effects of safety behavior?

- Don't seem to be doing less safety behavior leads to a reduction in anxiety - long term avoidance or avoidance is often accompanied by a powerful belief that you're in danger. Perhaps powerful enough to make you and even an individual has learned that safety behaviors lead to relief they're likely to use again.
- Long term in the long 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 feet" 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.
- Catastrophic/unhelpful 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	"People always think they will think get disgusting and repulsive"	Keep away from my class	Reduction anxiety because no-one noticed my absence	People avoid me because I'm not in class	Keeping away at my school makes people think I'm weird
Physically assaulted by a group of boys while walking home	"People are dangerous. If they ever contact I will be attacked"	Avoidance and limited social contact	Feel slightly safer when avoided	People learn that avoidance doesn't generally help - being avoided	People learn that avoidance doesn't help
Wrote a letter to a friend about my feelings in class experience of sexual abuse	"The other kids in my class, they don't look interestedly. They don't want to get involved"	Control my face and reduce social interaction	Feel good to be talking to a friend about my feelings - but a bit shy at first	People avoid me because they don't want to be involved with me - they don't want to be involved with me	People avoid me because they don't want to be involved with me

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

Just by feelings of the belief or threat, there is no way of telling the difference between unhelpful safety behaviors and helpful adaptive behaviors. It is the intention that matters - safety behaviors are those which are intended to create a sense of relief or escape. For example, if the strategy of distraction is used to cope with a painful experience such as a visit to the dentist we say it's helpful. However, if distraction is used with the intention of preventing a catastrophe such as avoiding feelings of panic the first will make us go back there; can be regarded as unhelpful safety behavior.