

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 near a location
2. Dodge - e.g. leaving a feared situation
3. Safety behaviors, which are subtle things we do to decrease anxiety e.g.
 - distraction - wanting to my head to keep panic to stop myself from going mad
 - clenching my breathing - otherwise I'll be overwhelmed by my fear and lose control
 - bracing my feet - in case someone picks me up and I'm hurt

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 you're needed. Perhaps powerful negative beliefs are, and once an individual has learned that safety behaviors lead to relief they're likely to use them.
- 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 at my desk	Reduction anxiety because no-one noticed my anxiety	People avoid me because I'm so nervous	Keeping away at my desk 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 eye contact	Reduction anxiety because I'm not being approached (short)	People learn that avoidance doesn't generally help - being avoided	People learn that avoidance doesn't help
Wrote a letter to a friend about a problem, but the experience of writing it was awful	"The more I write my fears, the more I will eventually write them down and get them out of my head"	Contact my friend to discuss my problem	Reduction anxiety because I'm talking to a supportive friend - but a bit later it's gone	People learn that talking to a friend doesn't help, and that not all unhelpful thoughts are a problem to be solved	People learn that talking to a friend doesn't help

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

Just by feelings 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 time you go to the dentist) can be regarded as unhelpful safety behavior.