

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 are maintaining anxiety

What is a catastrophic belief?

Catastrophic beliefs are usually, but not always, for different kinds of threats to the individual, for example:

- Physical threat - "If I get killed" "If I get hurt"
- Psychological threat - "If I go mad" "I can't cope"
- Social threat - "If I embarrass myself and never be able to sleep or have a job" "They will look for 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. 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 or I'm hurtled

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 reinforced. Perhaps powerful negative beliefs are, and once an individual has learned that safety behaviors lead to relief they are likely to use them.
- 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 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 notices 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 when 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
Widespread fear of physical aggression by others in their experience of sexual assault	"The attack shows me that, if I don't look immediately aggressive then I will get attacked again"	Control eye but otherwise limit appearance	Reduction anxiety because I'm not being approached (short) - but a lot later on	People avoid me because they think I'm aggressive and that's all of my anxiety	People avoid me because I'm aggressive

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 and outcomes - safety behaviors are those which are intended to create fear of a catastrophe. For example? The strategy of distraction used to cope with a painful experience such as visit to the dentist may be 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 mad then it can be regarded as unhelpful safety behavior.