

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 commonly associated, but not confined, to 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. not going to a feared situation
2. Dodge - e.g. leaving a feared situation
3. Safety behaviors, which are visible things one does to avoid a threat - e.g.
 - distraction - wanting to my head to keep a partner's face away from gasping
 - covering 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 in the probability. 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 "I'll be overwhelmed by my fear" and avoids things they don't get the opportunity to learn that most doctors in hospitals, or fail to learn the difference between friendly and unfriendly dogs.
- Catastrophic consequences: 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 attempts	People eventually learn that most people don't give a damn about what you look like	Keeping away at my desk makes people think you're weird
Physically assaulted by a partner at work while working from home	"People are dangerous. If they ever contact I will be attacked"	Avoidance and blocked all contact	Reduction anxiety when no-one is around	People learn that avoidance does not generally help - being avoided	People learn that avoidance does not help
Wife experienced a violent explosion in the workplace at work	"She'll be killed by that, it's just not a matter of when she'll be killed but how"	Control eye but otherwise focus on work	Reduction anxiety by focusing on work	People eventually learn that efforts to avoid the threat, and that not all unhelpful thoughts are a guarantee of an attack	Unintended consequences lead to more unhelpful thoughts

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 a feeling of panic the first will not be a safe strategy, can be regarded as unhelpful safety behavior.