

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 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 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 that is 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 "I'll go mad if I panic" and bracing my feet and people they don't get the opportunity to learn that most doctors if friends, 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 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 when walking home	"People are dangerous. If they ever contact I will be attacked"	Avoidance and braced my contact	Feel slightly safer when avoid contact	People learn that avoidance doesn't generally help - being attacked	People learn that I'm weird
Wrote depression out of character at school by not experience of "normal school"	"The other kids are that, it's just not conventional. It's like they must get attacked again"	Control my but otherwise family appearance	Feel good to be calm in a social situation (especially) but a bit like at home	People avoid me because they think I'm weird and that all of my friends' attention is a pressure to be OK	People avoid me because I'm weird

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 fear of a catastrophe. For example, if the strategy of distraction is used to cope with a painful experience (e.g. a visit to the dentist) we say it's helpful. However, if distraction is used with the intention of preventing a catastrophe (e.g. to avoid a feeling of panic the first will make me go mad) then it can be regarded as unhelpful safety behavior.