

Anxiety Behaviors

There are two types of behaviors that characterize anxiety: avoidance and safety behaviors. We avoid and seek safety when we are anxious, because these behaviors help us to feel better in the short-run. However, these common ways of coping with anxiety also tend to prolong our anxiety, making it worse in the long-run

Avoidance

Peter needed to take a speech class as a school requirement. He felt really anxious when he imagined speaking in front of his class. As a result, whenever he thought about working on his speech, he procrastinated and did other things so he could avoid feeling anxious. When he went out with his friends instead of working on the speech, he immediately felt better, because thoughts about the speech were replaced with a focus on his friends. As the weeks went by, however, Peter became more and more afraid about the upcoming speech. In addition, Peter did not speak up in class. Each time he had something to say, he felt a surge in his anxiety. When he decided not to speak, his anxiety immediately decreased. Every time Peter avoided speaking, he was rewarded by feeling better, which made it more likely that he would keep avoiding.

Although Peter's avoidance helped him feel less anxious in the moment, it actually made his anxiety worse over time. Avoidance usually leads to an increase in anxiety for four reasons: (1) By not approaching and learning more about what frightens us, we don't have an opportunity to learn ways to tolerate our anxiety; (2) we don't learn ways to cope with the situation that frightens us; (3) we don't have an opportunity to learn that the situation may not be as dangerous as we fear; and (4) we don't have an opportunity to find out if we are already capable of dealing well with the situation.

Mark, another student in Peter's speech class, also felt anxious about giving a speech. Rather than avoiding working on his speech, however, he took steps to reduce his anxiety. First, Mark asked other students about the teacher and speech class, to find out how high the standards would be. He learned that the teacher was a tough grader, but was encouraging as long as students made efforts to participate in class. Mark felt anxious when he sat down to prepare his speech, but stuck with it and learned that his anxiety decreased a bit when he began writing down possible topics and ideas. He began preparing his speech early and practiced dozens of times. He discovered that his anxiety decreased with practice and preparation.

Mark also made comments in class discussions so that he could practice expressing himself in the group. These experiences increased his confidence that he could speak up and cope with everyone looking at him. One day a class member disagreed with one of his ideas and made fun of him. He felt his face flush, but later realized that it was not the end of the world, and he felt good about how he had handled this situation. Another classmate told him that she thought his critic had been rude; this helped Mark realize that even if he made some mistakes or people disagreed with what he was saying, some people might still think positively about him.

One of the things we can learn from the examples of Peter and Mark is that avoidance brings immediate relief but increases anxiety over time. Facing our fears often leads to distress at first, but helps us overcome anxiety in time. If you have been experiencing anxiety, you may have been avoiding a number of situations and experiences. Make a list below of some of the things you have been avoiding because of anxiety