

Safety Behaviours

In addition to avoidance, we often engage in safety behaviours when we feel anxious. What are "safety behaviours"? These are things we do to reduce our sense of risk or keep from being hurt in situations that make us anxious. While these purposes sound like good things, safety behaviours actually often make our anxiety worse, because they increase our perception that this situation is much more dangerous than it may actually be. Here are some examples.

Tyra is afraid of snakes. When she takes her daughter to the Zoo, she checks on the map to see where the snake exhibit is housed. Even though she would prefer avoiding this exhibit, her daughter wants to see the snakes, so she goes into the exhibit. While she is there, Tyra keeps one arm on her daughter, just in case she needs to grab her and run out of the exhibit quickly because a snake has gotten loose. Because she keeps her arm on her daughter (safety behaviour), Tyra actually thinks even more about danger than usual and feels more anxious, even though the actual danger is close to zero.

Kenji is anxious about a lot of different things. At night, he is nervous that someone will break into his home. He locks his door, and then a few minutes' later gets anxious and checks the door (safety behaviour) to confirm that it is locked. He repeats this ritual eight or nine times a night, every night. His anxiety goes down briefly each time he sees the door is locked, but his worries quickly return, and he questions his memory that the door is locked. Checking the doors is a safety behaviour and it keeps Kenji focused on the danger of an intruder. His safety behaviours do not have lasting benefit in terms of reducing his anxiety.

Roberta has to attend a weekly office meeting. Each week she becomes very anxious, because she is afraid the manager will ask her a question or assign her a job that she can't do. She attends all the meetings, but sits in the back row (safety behaviour). She also refrains from coughing, making eye contact, or volunteering information she does have (more safety behaviours), because she doesn't want to draw attention to herself. These safety behaviours succeed in keeping Roberta out of the manager's awareness, but they do not reduce her anxiety over time. Instead, each week that her manager does not speak to her, Roberta becomes more and more convinced that she could not handle it if he did. Thus, over time, she becomes even more anxious in office meetings.

Just like Tyra, Kenji, and Roberta, you may be using safety behaviours when you get anxious. See if you can identify two or three safety behaviours you sometimes use to try to prevent or reduce anxiety. Remember that sometimes safety behaviours are things you do (e.g., only going to parties if a friend is with you, keeping an antianxiety pill in your pocket in case you start to feel anxious) and sometimes things you don't do (e.g., not making eye contact so people won't talk to you, sitting in an aisle seat instead of the middle of a row so you can make a quick exit if necessary).

Although this is relevant to all types of anxiety the above examples used someone that has a phobia about snakes; someone else who is OCD about checking locks and Roberta who appears to have some social anxiety. Socially anxious people develop a wide repertoire of 'safety behaviours', or things that they do in order to reduce the sense of being at risk, for example:

- Looking at the floor so that no one can catch your eye
- Wearing heavy make-up to hide your blushes,
- Wearing light clothing in case they feel hot and sweaty
- Leaving the room immediately the meeting is over so that you do not have to get involved in 'small talk'.
- Rehearsing what you are about to say; mentally checking you have got the words right
- Speaking slowly, or quietly; or talking fast and not stopping to draw breath
- Hiding your hands or face; putting your hands to your mouth
- Holding things tight, or locking your knees together to control shaking
- Letting your hair fall in front of your face; wearing clothes that hide parts of your body
- Trying to amuse people and tell jokes; or never risking a joke
- Not talking about yourself or your feelings; not expressing opinions
- Saying nothing that might be challenging or controversial; always agreeing
- Wearing smart clothes (the 'veneer'), or unnoticeable clothes (so as not to stand out)
- Sticking with a 'safe' person or in a 'safe' place; not taking any chances
- Keeping an eye on the escape route; never getting fully involved

A 'safety' behaviour is doing something to keep yourself safe. Generally safety behaviours are not helpful although they can be useful as a stepping stone to at least stop us avoiding a situation and then they can be dropped later.