

What is the Difference between Safety Behaviours and Coping with Anxiety?

When we use safety behaviours, we often think we are doing a good job of coping with our anxiety. But as the examples above show, safety behaviours generally keep us focused on danger and support our belief that situations are highly dangerous, even when they may not be. Like avoidance, safety behaviours help us feel better in the moment, but they actually prolong our struggles with anxiety. This is because safety behaviours prevent us from fully facing our fears and having the opportunity to build our confidence that we can handle things that go wrong or seem dangerous to us.

Good coping, on the other hand, usually involves approaching our fears and managing our reactions and the situations that scare us. When we practice coping with our fears, we build up confidence we can handle them, and our anxiety decreases. There are two ways to tell the difference between safety behaviours and coping behaviours:

1. Safety behaviours are designed to eliminate danger; coping behaviours are designed to help us approach, stay in, and manage situations that frighten us.
2. Safety behaviours maintain or increase anxiety; coping behaviours lead to a decrease in anxiety over time.

Tyra, Kenji, and Roberta are likely to experience a decrease in anxiety after a while if they start to use coping instead of safety behaviours. For example, a good coping behaviour for Tyra might be to take her hand off her daughter and watch her daughter's excitement at seeing the snakes. In addition, Tyra can remind herself that all the snakes, even the, most dangerous ones, are safely enclosed and not able to escape.

In order to cope, Kenji could focus his attention on the action of locking the door. Then, when he begins to feel anxious, he can stop himself from rechecking the door and instead remind himself that he can tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort. This might be difficult at first, but over time his urge to check will decrease, and he will realize that the checking does not really increase his safety.

Roberta is fearful of being asked questions or assigned jobs that will put her in the spotlight and lead to embarrassment or failure. Good coping might involve speaking out in meetings when she does know information. She could also practice things she might say if her manager asks her a question she does not know the answer to. If she is assigned to a job she does not know how to do, she could ask for help from a co-worker to build her skills. The first few times Roberta tries these coping behaviours, she is likely to feel more anxious. However, with experience, she will learn that often nothing bad happens, and that even when it does, she can cope. Over time and with practice, her anxiety will decrease and her confidence will increase.

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).