

Safety Behaviours

What are safety behaviours?

Safety behaviours are used in an attempt to prevent fears from coming true and to feel more comfortable in situations we are anxious about. If we believe that a situation will not go well, we are likely to feel anxious and to have an urge to avoid the situation. If we can't avoid the situation all together, we might use subtle forms of avoidance or precautions to try to prevent our fears from coming true. We call these safety behaviours.

Safety behaviours may be very different for different people. It is not what you do, but why you are doing it that determines whether something is considered a safety behaviour.

Here are some examples... Some of these are behaviours people might engage in without anxiety. For example, someone might wear headphones on public transport to listen to music for enjoyment, rather than because they are anxious about speaking to people. This highlights that it is not the behaviour itself, but the function of the behaviour that is important.

If you are uncertain whether something is a safety behaviour or not, ask yourself: how anxious would I feel if I could not do this? If you would feel anxious without the behaviour, it is probably a safety behaviour.

Why are safety behaviours a problem?

Safety behaviours may seem helpful because they reduce anxiety in the short-term. Unfortunately, they keep anxiety going in the longer term because... Safety behaviours stop us from directly testing our fears. Although we haven't avoided the situation completely, by using our safety behaviours we are not directly testing our fear. Our untested fears will continue to arise in the future. Safety behaviours can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Safety behaviours can actually cause the outcomes we are trying to prevent by using them.

For instance, imagine if I stay quiet at work meetings because I am worried about saying something wrong and my boss being annoyed. My boss might actually get more frustrated with me for not contributing to meetings than they

would have if I did contribute from time to time. If our fears don't come true, we mistakenly 'thank' the safety behaviour. If we use our safety behaviours and our fears don't come true, we might believe that the safety behaviours 'prevented' our fears.

As a result, we can become very dependent upon our safety behaviours and start to feel even more anxious if they can't be used. The truth may be that our fears might not have come true even without the safety behaviour, but we never discover this as long as we continue relying on them.

Safety behaviours increase our self-focused attention.

Safety behaviours often take our focus off the 'task at hand', and instead our awareness becomes overly focused on ourselves (e.g., our thoughts, how we are feeling), which can lead to further anxiety. If anxiety stays high after repeatedly confronting a situation, you are likely using safety behaviours that are preventing you from directly testing your fears. It's important to recognise safety behaviours so you can plan to stop using them in anxiety-provoking situations.