Safety behaviours

The precautions people take when anxious, and why they keep anxiety going.

A safety behaviour is anything you do to stop a feared outcome from happening, or to get through a situation you are afraid of. In real danger they make sense. In a false alarm they cause a problem: you never find out that you would have been fine anyway.

Examples

Panic
Sitting near the exit. Carrying water or tablets "just in case". Holding on to something. Only going out with someone.

Social anxiety
Rehearsing what to say. Avoiding eye contact. Staying quiet. Gripping a glass so no one sees a shake.

Health anxiety
Checking your body. Looking up symptoms. Asking others if you look all right.

Worry
Over-planning. Making endless lists. Checking that people got home safely. Putting off decisions.

Why they backfire

1. **They stop you learning.** If nothing bad happens, the safety behaviour gets the credit: "I only coped because I sat by the door."
2. **They keep your attention on danger.** Monitoring yourself makes you notice more that seems wrong.
3. **They can cause the very thing you fear.** Gripping a glass tightly makes a hand shake more. Rehearsing every sentence makes conversation stilted.
4. **They grow.** What starts as one precaution becomes a list of rules.

Letting them go

- Make a list of yours. Some are obvious, some are subtle, and some happen only in your head.
- Pick one and treat dropping it as an experiment. What do you predict will happen? What actually happens?
- Expect anxiety to rise at first. That is normal. It does not mean the experiment has failed.

How to tell
Ask yourself, "If I were not anxious, would I still be doing this?" If the answer is no, it is probably a safety behaviour.

My notes and questions

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Dropping a safety behaviour

Find out what happens when you let go of one precaution.

Name _____ Date _____

The safety behaviour I am going to drop (what I usually do to feel safe)

The situation where I will try it

What I fear will happen if I do not do it

How strongly do I believe that?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What I will do instead (for example: look up and keep my hands relaxed)

What actually happened

How strongly do I believe my fear now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What does this tell me about how much I need the safety behaviour?

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