# 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**

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.