Stepping Out of Social Anxiety

Module 5

Safety Behaviours

Introduction

At this point in the modules you have learned about how to challenge your negative predictions, and how to use behavioural experiments to test your fears. In this module we will focus on safety behaviours, which are subtle avoidance behaviours. We will look at how safety behaviours keep us stuck in our anxiety, and why it is important to drop them.

What are safety behaviours?

It is very difficult to completely avoid all social situations. However, when people with social anxiety can't avoid social situations they often rely on more subtle forms of avoidance called **safety behaviours**. Safety behaviours are used in an attempt to prevent feared predictions from coming true and to feel more comfortable in social situations.

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 is an example: Sarah and Jane are doing the same thing, but for different reasons…

	Sarah	Jane
What is the behaviour?	Listening to music on the bus.	Listening to music on the bus.
What is the *function* of the behaviour?	It is a fun way to pass the time.	Wearing headphones means people won't try to talk to me.
What would happen without the behaviour?	If it wasn't possible to listen to music on the bus, it might be a bit boring, but it would not be a big deal. I could still catch the bus.	If I couldn't wear headphones on the bus I would feel really anxious. I'm worried someone would try to talk to me – I won't know what to say and they will think I am weird. I wouldn't want to catch the bus without my headphones.

As you can see, although the behaviour is the same, the *function* of the behaviour is different. If a behaviour is intended to prevent our fears from coming true, then it is a safety behaviour. In this case, Jane is listening to music on the bus as a safety behaviour because she is trying to reduce the chance of her social fears coming true.

The problem with safety behaviours

While safety behaviours may help you to feel safer in the short-term, unfortunately they serve to maintain social anxiety in the longer term because…

1. 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 fears. For instance, if you attend a university tutorial but don't contribute then you never get to test your prediction of "*saying something stupid and other people laughing or looking confused at my answers*". When the next tutorial comes along the same prediction will come to mind and again you will

be gripped by fear. If you directly tested your fear by making a contribution to the tutorial you would have an opportunity to discover that your negative prediction was perhaps inaccurate. After you test the prediction numerous times and find that it does not come true then the negative prediction can be seen for what it is – just a thought or image that does not reflect reality. It will have less emotional impact and it will no longer need to dictate what you do.

2. 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 you stay quiet at work meetings because you are worried about saying something wrong and your boss being annoyed. Your boss might actually get more frustrated with you for not contributing to meetings than they would have if you did contribute from time to time.

3. 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 have '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.

4. Safety behaviours increase our self-focused attention. Safety behaviours often involve people scrutinising themselves (what they are doing, how they are doing it, monitoring their thoughts), which can be very distracting. Self-focused attention hijacks attention from the 'task at hand' (e.g., the conversation), which can make it even more difficult to keep up with conversations and contribute.

So, as you can see, we may think safety behaviours help us feel more comfortable, but they keep our social anxiety going in the longer-term. If anxiety remains high after repeatedly confronting a social situation, chances are you are using safety behaviours that are preventing you from directly testing your fears.

Identifying safety behaviours

To overcome social anxiety we need to stop using our safety behaviours. The first step in this process is to recognise your safety behaviours – this can be hard to do, as they are often subtle and might have been used for so long that they are quite habitual. You might also use different safety behaviours in different situations. Here are some examples of common safety behaviours:

Behaviour	The outcome I'm trying to prevent
Staying quiet in social situations	If I talk I might say something stupid and I would feel humiliated
Wearing headphones on public transport	If someone tried to speak to me I wouldn't know what to say and they would think I am an idiot

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No/limited eye contact	If I looked up I would see negative reactions from others, or they might try to talk to me, and I wouldn't be able to cope
Alcohol/Drugs	If I didn't use alcohol or drugs my anxiety would overwhelm me and I wouldn't be able to interact with people
Rehearse/plan what I'm about to say	If I don't plan what I will say I will stumble over my words or say something stupid
Wear inconspicuous clothes	If I don't dress plainly then I will draw negative attention to myself
Keep the focus of conversation on other people	If I shared anything personal people would think I was boring or stupid
Carrying anxiety medication	If I don't have my medication available I will feel completely overwhelmed and would not be able to cope

This list might give you some ideas of behaviours to look out for. You might also use other safety behaviours that are not on this list. Safety behaviours might be about trying to minimise anxiety, trying to make anxiety less obvious to others, trying to avoid attention, or trying to come across better to others. To start to tune in to some of your safety behaviours, think about the following:

When you can't avoid a situation, what do you do to make yourself feel less anxious?_____

_____

When you feel anxious in a social situation, what do you do to avoid attention?_____

_____

When you feel anxious in a social situation, what do you do to come across better to others?_____

_____

Are there situations that you have approached lots of times, but that you are still anxious about? What do you do in this situation to reduce your anxiety?_____

_____

You might find that some of the examples from the previous page are relevant to you, or that the answers to the questions above have highlighted some of your safety behaviours. You might need to keep adding to this list over time as you become more aware of your safety behaviours.

Dropping safety behaviours

Once you are aware of your safety behaviours, the next step is to drop them. This can be hard at first, as you may have come to depend on your safety behaviours to manage your anxiety. You might feel a bit more anxious in the short-term when you start to drop your safety behaviours, but in the longer term dropping your safety behaviours will lead to reduced anxiety.

Because safety behaviours get in the way of testing social fears the most efficient approach is to stop using any safety behaviours you are aware of right away. If you are not prepared to do that, then you could also choose to drop your safety behaviours in a more gradual way (starting with those that are easiest to drop, and working towards those that are harder to drop). On the next page you will find an example of a behavioural experiment about letting go of safety behaviours.

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Behavioural experiment example - Troy

Troy feels anxious talking about himself, as he is worried other people won't be interested in what he has to say. In social situations, he uses the safety behaviour of keeping the focus of conversation on other people. His anxiety about saying something personal is 8/10. Troy completed the following experiment to test his fears.

Negative Thoughts Describe your prediction. Specifically, what do you think will happen? What negative images do you have about the situation?	Anxiety /10 How anxious do you feel?	Experiment Specifically, what could you do to test these thoughts?	Evidence to Observe Specifically, what do you need to look for to confirm or disconfirm your thoughts?	Results What happened? What clear evidence did you collect? Stick to unambiguous facts.	Conclusion What conclusion follows from your results? How can you keep this new information in mind? How can you find more opportunities to test your predictions?
If I talk about anything personal then people won't be interested. They will think I am boring and will want to get out of the conversation as quickly as possible.	8/10	When I go out with my friends I will join the conversation and share something about myself. **Safety Behaviours to drop** I will need to drop the safety behaviour of always keeping the focus on others. I will also drop the safety behaviour of avoiding eye contact. I will need to look at people to know how they are reacting.	Do my friends seem bored and uninterested in what I have to say? Some signs they are bored by me would be them directly saying something negative about how boring I am; them ignoring my contribution; them immediately changing the subject, or immediately leaving the conversation after I speak.	My friends were talking about holidays they have taken, and I talked about the trip I took last year. A few people asked some questions about my trip. They seemed interested and the conversation kept going. There was no sign that my friends thought I was boring. One friend said they would like to see photos of my trip.	It turned out better than I expected. My friends seemed interested in what I had to say. I can challenge myself. I was able to cope with the anxiety I felt about sharing something personal. I should keep testing my fears. I've added a note to my phone to remind myself that this situation went better than expected. I can keep testing my fears by speaking about something personal at lunch with my family tomorrow.

Plan your behavioural experiment

Plan an experiment where you will drop one or more of your safety behaviours. What are you worried will happen if you don't use your safety behaviour? Note this down in the negative thoughts column, and plan how you will test these fears and what evidence you will need to observe during your experiment. Then, conduct the experiment and write down your results and conclusions. You may need to conduct several behavioural experiments to learn what happens when you drop your safety behaviours.

Negative Thoughts Describe your prediction. Specifically, what do you think will happen? What negative images do you have about the situation?	Anxiety /10 How anxious do you feel?	Experiment Specifically, what could you do to test these thoughts?	Evidence to Observe Specifically, what do you need to look for to confirm or disconfirm your thoughts?	Results What happened? What clear evidence did you collect? Stick to unambiguous facts.	Conclusion What conclusion follows from your results? What did you learn by dropping your safety behaviours? How can you keep this new information in mind? How can you find more opportunities to test your predictions?
		Safety Behaviours to drop			

Module Summary

- Safety behaviours are a subtle form of avoidance. They may help you feel more comfortable in the short term, but keep your anxiety going in the longer term.

- Safety behaviours may be different for everyone – there is no definitive list of safety behaviours! To discover your safety behaviours, pay attention to what you do to try to reduce your anxiety in social situations. 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.

- Safety behaviours may have become habitual over time, so you might need to make a conscious effort to notice your safety behaviours. You may discover new safety behaviours over time, as you become more aware of them.

- Once you become aware of your safety behaviours, it is important to drop them. This might increase your anxiety temporarily, but will help you overcome your anxiety in the longer term.

- It is preferable to drop your safety behaviours immediately, as this will allow you to learn more from your behavioural experiments. You can use your behavioural experiment hierarchy from Module 4 to plan a step you are willing to try without safety behaviours. If you are not willing to drop all of your safety behaviours immediately, you can use your behavioural experiment hierarchy to help you gradually phase them out over time.

Coming Up...

In the next module we will discuss the role of attention in maintaining social anxiety. We will introduce strategies to retrain your attention in a more helpful way.

About the Modules

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Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

McEvoy, P. & Saulsman, L. (2017). *Imagery-Based Cognitive Behaviour Group Therapy for Social Anxiety Disorder (IB-CBGT)*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Examples of this are reported in:

McEvoy, P. M., Hyett, M. P., Bank, S. R., Erceg-Hurn, D. M., Johnson, A. R., Kyron, M. J., Saulsman, L. M., Moulds, M. L., Grisham, J. R., Holmes, E. A., Moscovitch, D. A., Lipp, O. V. Campbell, B. N. C., & Rapee, R. M. (in press). Imagery-enhanced versus verbally-based group cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder: a randomized clinical trial. *Psychological Medicine.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720003001

Rapee, R. M., Gaston, J. E., & Abbott, M. J. (2009). Testing the efficacy of theoretically derived improvements in the treatment of social phobia. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 77,* 317–327.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

McEvoy, P. M., Saulsman, L. M., & Rapee, R. M. (2018). *Imagery-enhanced CBT for social anxiety disorder.* Guilford Press.

Hackmann, A., Bennett-Levy, J., & Holmes, E. A. (Eds., 2011). *Oxford Guide to Imagery in Cognitive   Therapy.* Oxford:Oxford University Press.

Kemp, N., Thompson, A., Gaston, J., & Rapee, R. (2003). Cognitive behavioural therapy-enhanced for social anxiety disorder: group treatment program. Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University.

Saulsman, L. M., Ji, J. L., & McEvoy, P. M. (2019). The essential role of mental imagery in cognitive behaviour therapy: what is old is new again. Invited review for *Australian Psychologist, 54*, 237-244. doi: 10.1111/ap.12406.

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