



OVERCOMING ANXIETY - 10

FACING OUR TRIGGERS: EXPOSURE – RESPONSE PREVENTION

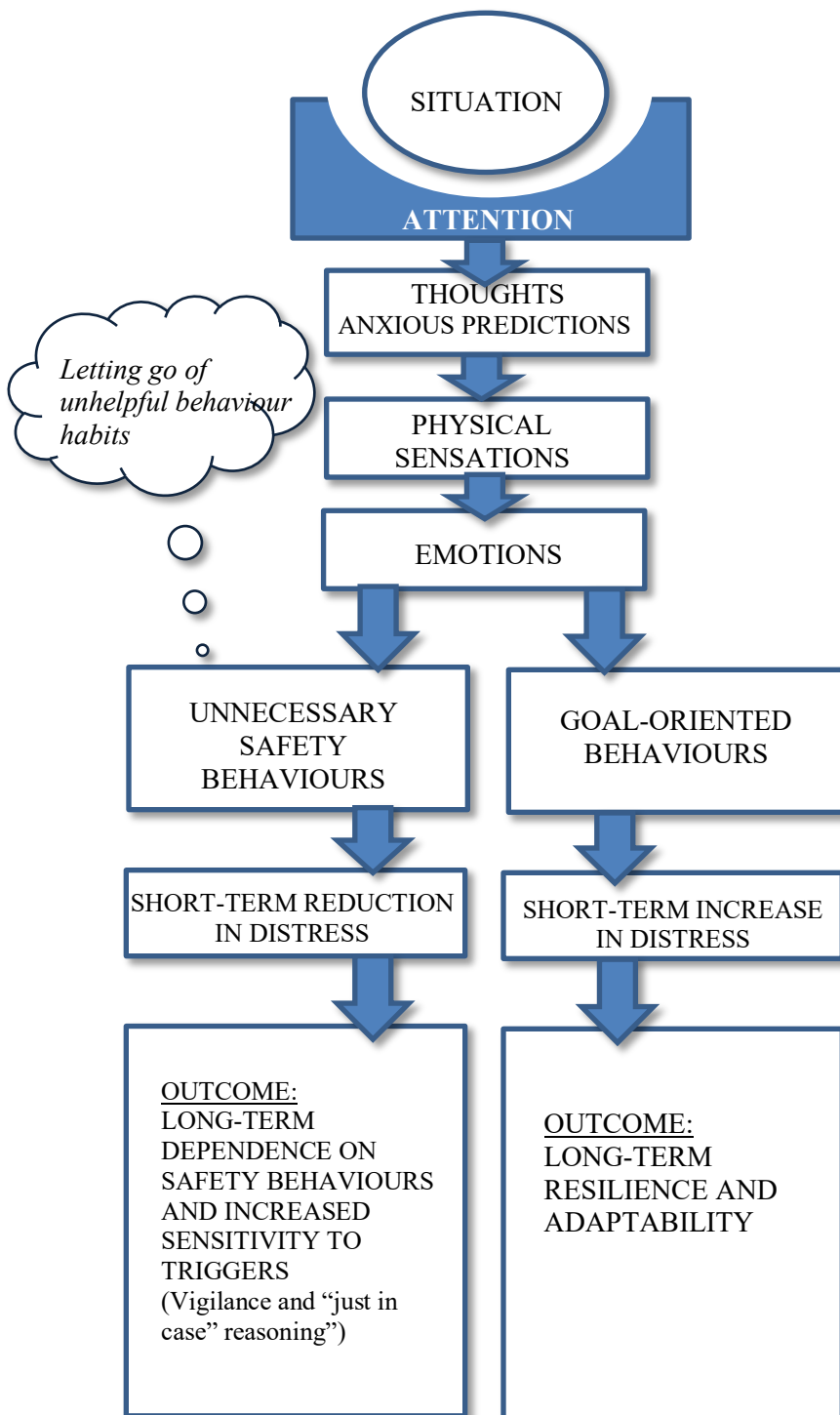


Figure 1:
LETTING GO OF UNHELPFUL BEHAVIOURS

COPING VS. SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Safety-seeking behaviours are *behaviors* which are carried out (either overtly or covertly) and which are *intended to prevent feared catastrophes*. By contrast coping behaviours are meant to reduce sensations of anxiety in order to complete a desired task and the person who uses a coping behaviour understands that *coping behaviours do not prevent a catastrophe and merely allow things to feel more comfortable*.

Unnecessary safety behaviours can include:

- **avoidance** (not facing feared situations),
- **escape** (leaving feared situations once anxiety is noticed)
- **subtle avoidance** (covert, often internal processes such as distraction, focus on breathing or aversion of eye contact, etc.)
- **checking or reassurance seeking** (asking for multiple opinions on the same subject, repeatedly seeking same information, monitoring of body symptoms)
- **hypervigilance** (acute state of sensory sensitivity meant to detect danger “just in time”; and
- **overthinking** or over-preparing (e.g., worrying, searching for more and more information).

CONSEQUENCES OF UNNECESSARY SAFETY BEHAVIOURS:

- **Short term:** In short term safety behaviours lead to a reduction in anxiety. Any form of escape or avoidance is often accompanied by a powerful feeling of relief. Relief is a powerful negative reinforcer. *Once you learn that safety behaviour leads to reduction of anxiety, you are likely to become dependent on it.* This is true even if a safety behaviour does nothing to actually increase your safety. Consider a person who fears crowds and consequently goes for walks alone at night or someone who fears germs and washes their hands extensively to a point of creating skin damage and consequently being more prone to infections.
- **Long term:** In the longer term, safety behaviours act to maintain anxiety by preventing the disconfirmation of unhelpful beliefs. For example, a person who has the belief that “dogs will attack me and bite my face” and avoids dogs will not be able to learn that most dogs are friendly and learn to differentiate between friendly and unfriendly animals. Similarly, someone who believes that anxiety will produce catastrophic health consequences (e.g., stroke) will try to avoid anxiety producing situations or monitor their body for signs of anxiety at a level that might become so habitual that it is hardly noticed. As a result, such a person maintains high levels of baseline anxiety and creates the symptoms that they fear (e.g., increased blood pressure).
- **Unintended consequences:** Safety behaviours often have unintended consequences which can reinforce the original belief, make anxiety worse or lead to other problems. Examples of such consequences are listed in the table below:

Early Experience	Belief	Safety Behaviour	Consequences		
			Short-Term	Long-Term	Unintended
Humiliated at school about blushing	<i>If people see me blush, they will laugh at me</i>	Wears a lot of foundation makeup.	Reduction in anxiety because no-one can see you blush	No opportunities to learn that most people don't notice or don't generally make fun of people who blush	Exposed to comments about excessive makeup; avoids strenuous activities to ensure that makeup won't run.
Physically assaulted while walking home	<i>People are dangerous if I make eye contact</i>	Averts eyes to avoid eye contact	Feels slightly safer around people	Fails to learn that eye contact does not generally lead to being attacked	People think that the person is odd or unfriendly
Being bullied or unjustly taken advantage of	<i>People will take advantage of me unless I show them that I am strong.</i>	Routinely confronts others about lack of respect	Feels strong, might obtain an occasional apology	Fails to learn that not everyone wants to take advantage; unable to negotiate without feeling or active defensive.	People think that the person is confrontational and might lose respect for him or her.

Use table below to further examine the difference between coping behaviours, unnecessary safety behaviours and reasonable precautions.

PERSONAL EXAMPLES	COPING BEHAVIOURS	UNNECESSARY SAFETY BEHAVIOURS	REASONABLE PRECAUTIONS
	CHARACTERISTICS	<i>Coping behaviours add comfort without being perceived as “lifesavers”.</i>	<i>Safety behaviours make us feel better, are perceived as lifesavers but in fact have no actual impact on the situation.</i>

Whether what we do is an unnecessary safety behaviour, or a coping behaviour often depends on the function that we believe the behaviour to serve. For instance, having a glass of water when giving a presentation is a typical coping behaviour if you believe that it makes it easier for you because you take a little break to have a sip and it simply prevents your throat from getting too dry while talking. However, it could become a safety behaviour if you refuse to go anywhere without having a water bottle with you or if you believe that you will make a fool of yourself without your water in hand. Some unnecessary safety behaviours become coping behaviours and eventually get forgotten. Some coping behaviours might just be reasonable precautions (e.g., it makes sense to have a glass of water for a long talk and it makes sense to check for your passport before going on a trip).

SAFETY BEHAVIOURS: INTENDED FUNCTION VS. ACTUAL IMPACT

Unnecessary safety behaviour	What is the intended function of this behaviour?	What is the actual impact of that behaviour?	Can this behaviour be replaced with a coping behaviour that makes more sense?
<i>Watches closely when family leaves home.</i>	<i>Ensuring their safety; trying to remember them in case I never see them again</i>	<i>Gets stuck at the doorway; overwhelmed with anxiety that something bad might happen to them</i>	<i>Say usual goodbyes and remind self that my watching out of the window does not increase their safety.</i>
<i>Tell everyone that I am not as good of a person as they might think I am</i>	<i>Reduce disappointment that others might feel and consequently decrease chances of rejection.</i>	<i>Relationships are very distant and people think that I am weird.</i>	<i>Allow relationships to develop without unnecessary warnings. Remind self that such warnings create questions that are difficult to answer.</i>
<i>Adjusts and readjusts the way that food items are placed on the plate</i>	<i>To achieve a “just right” feeling. Not quite sure of reason but it feels right to do it.</i>	<i>Cannot eat in public Many friends asked questions about my behaviour Eating becomes very complicated</i>	<i>Not really. I can try not to do it and try to tolerate having the “feeling of wrongness”. I have to remind myself that there feeling of “rightness” is very elusive.</i>

EXPOSURE – RESPONSE PREVENTION

Exposure-response prevention exercises are two-step exercises in which we face triggering situations and refrain from engaging in behaviours that are supposed to bring immediate relief. For example, in OCD, a person who washes their hands compulsively would be asked to touch a door handle and postpone washing their hands for at least 30 minutes. A person who has a tendency to over-explain/apologize whenever they make a mistake might be asked to make a minor correctable mistake on purpose, correct the mistake or issue one apology but refrain from the typical over-explanations. A person who tends to over-prepare would be asked to curb their preparation (e.g., having people for dinner might have some hosts prepare multiple dishes and clean their house for several hours – such persons will be asked to issue an invitation but limit themselves to “reasonable preparations”). A worrier will be asked to continue with postpone-the-worry exercises.

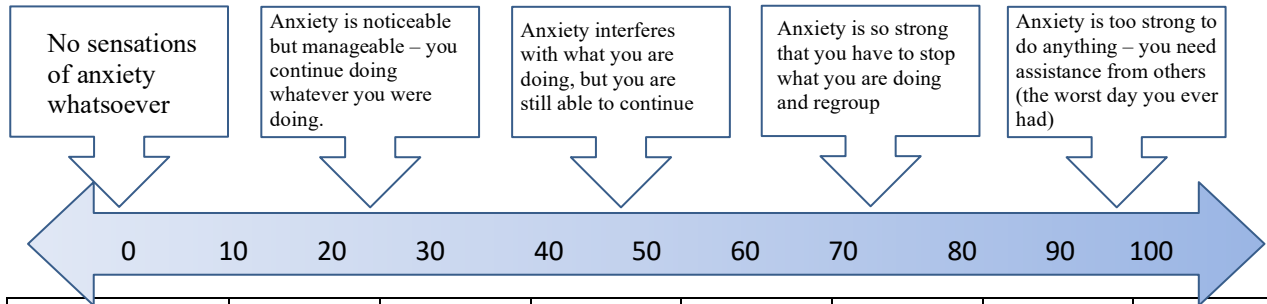
To help develop your own exposure – response prevention exercises make a list of things that you do too much and see if you can identify triggers for those unhelpful safety behaviours. The table can help you identify your unnecessary safety behaviours and situations in which they occur.

Unnecessary Safety Behaviour	Typical triggers or situations in which you are noticing the behaviour as being too much.
<input type="checkbox"/> Over-explaining, over-apologizing	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reassurance seeking	
<input type="checkbox"/> Adjusting and over-adjusting (in search of the right feeling)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Over-analyzing/worrying	
<input type="checkbox"/> Checking / double checking	
<input type="checkbox"/> Compulsive questioning of self or others	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not being able to let go until “all is known”	
<input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring changes in mood and or physical body sensations	
<input type="checkbox"/> Remaining vigilant or “on guard”	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other:	

BEHAVIOURAL EXPERIMENT: LETTING GO OF RITUALS AND UNNECESSARY SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

A: PREPARATION			
1: Describe the unhelpful behaviour that you plan to let go (e.g., excessive checking, reassurance seeking from people you care about, excessive self-questioning etc.)			2: How difficult will it be to let go of this unhelpful behaviour (0-100%)
3: In which situations do you tend to engage in this behaviour (e.g., when feeling uncertain about something or having dealt with a difficult interaction etc.)	4: What do you hope to accomplish as a result of doing what you're usually doing?	5: What are the actual results of your actions?	
6: Describe what you plan to do to practice letting go of the unhelpful behaviour (e.g., use postpone the worry technique or perspective taking worksheet, restrict checking of e-mail to once per day, restrict texting to twice per day, ask less questions, submit an application without having it proofread by someone else etc.). Indicate for how long you plan to postpone the unhelpful behaviour.			
REMEMBER: YOU MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO ELIMANTE THIS BEHAVIOUR ALL TOGETHER BUT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO POSTPONE IT AND MAKE IT LESS FREQUENT			
B: IMPLEMENTATION			
7: Keep of reminding yourself of the difference between the intended function of the behaviour that you are working on eliminating (box 4) and the actual results this behaviour produces (box 5)			
8: Describe the reactions you were having when practicing reducing the unhelpful behaviours			
Thoughts	Body Sensations:	Emotions:	Behaviours and behaviour urges:
C: LESSONS LEARNT			
9: Answer the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What did you do? b. What made it difficult to postpone / reduce the unhelpful behaviour? c. What happened when you have postponed / reduced the unhelpful behaviour? Did anyone get hurt? Were there some dire consequences? Describe the facts not your reactions. d. What have you learnt? (e.g., "This is very uncomfortable but what I am doing does not help me achieve what I want") 			
10: What are your next steps?			11: After having completed this exercises, how difficult do you think it will be to let go of this unhelpful behaviour (0-100%)

KEEPING TRACK AND KEEPING HONEST



DATE:								
Rate the intensity of your overall anxiety throughout the day using the scale above and mark it on the graph.	100							
	90							
	80							
	70							
	60							
	50							
	40							
	30							
	20							
	10							
	0							
What stresses were you faced with today?								
What skill have you practiced?	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry (APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving <input type="checkbox"/> Behavioural Experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Grounding	
What were you able to accomplish during the day?								
What exposure exercises did you set for yourself?								
<i>What unnecessary safety behaviour were you able to challenge or eliminate?</i>								
How much time was spent on worrying?								
How much time was spent on doing something proactive (problem solving, taking action steps)?								