

Avoidance and Safety behaviours

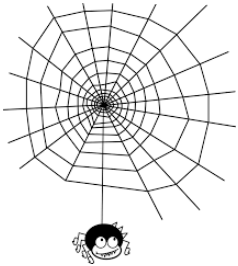
What happens to our behaviour when we feel anxious?

- We start to avoid situations and places where we predict anxiety will occur



for example...

- The person who fears a panic attack in crowded places might avoid supermarkets and cinemas

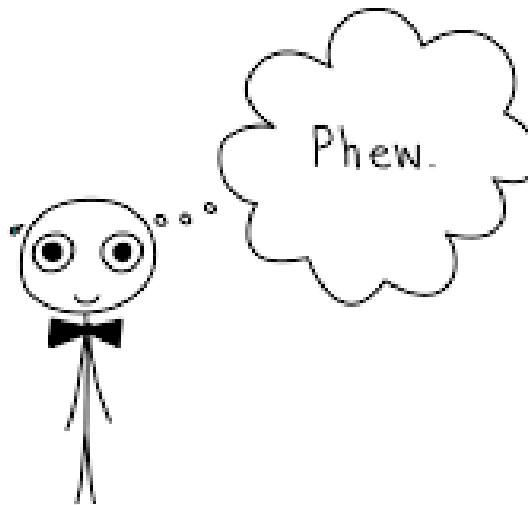


- The person who fears spiders will probably avoid dark corners or garden sheds where they might find spiders
- The person who fears social situations will avoid parties and social gatherings, or doing things with other people



So why does it matter?

- At the time we avoid the difficult situation, our anxiety goes down



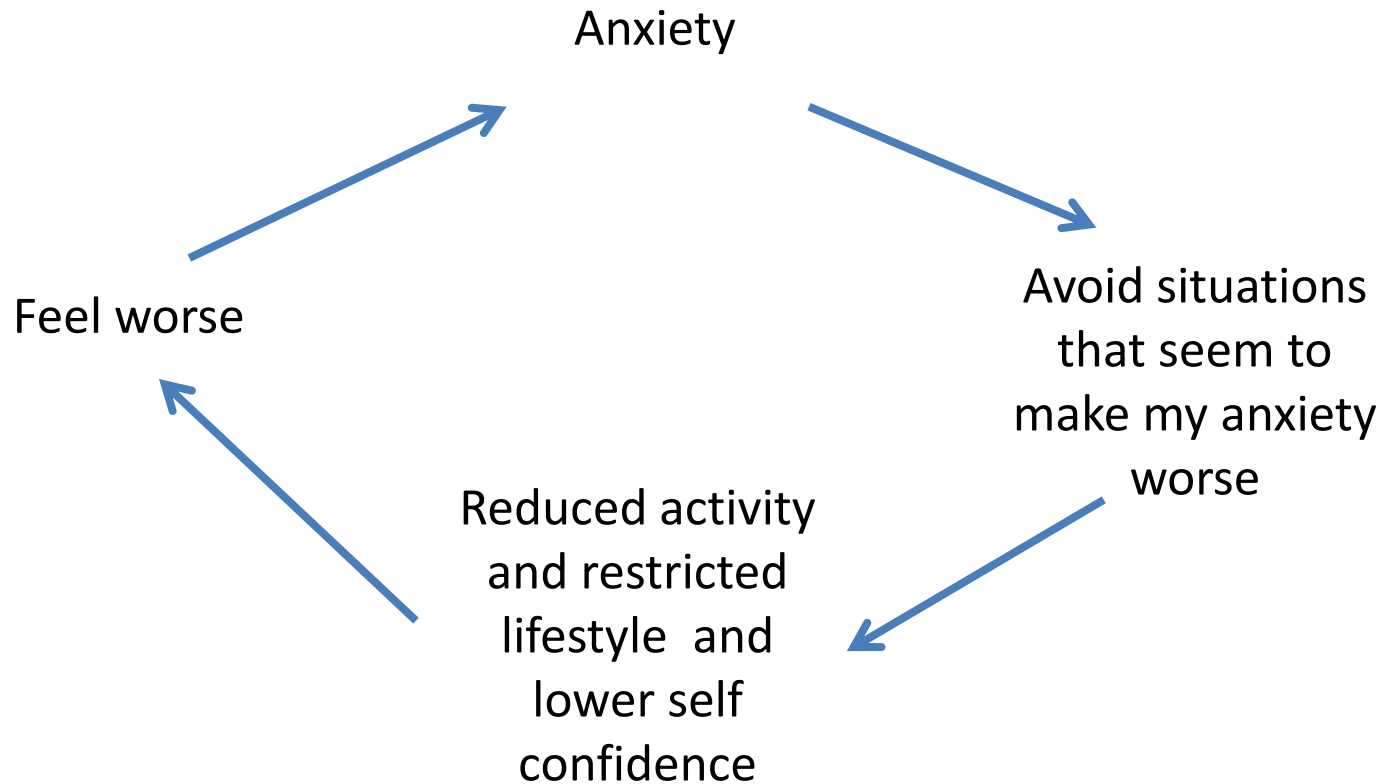
That's good right?!

BUT THERE IS A SNAG!

The snag is....

- We learn the unhelpful rule that “the only way of dealing with a difficult situation is to avoid it”
- In the future, it makes it more difficult for us to face the situation, we lose confidence
- We don't learn that the worst fears don't occur; or that we can cope
- Our life opportunities reduce and our anxiety can spread to other situations

The Vicious Cycle of Avoidance



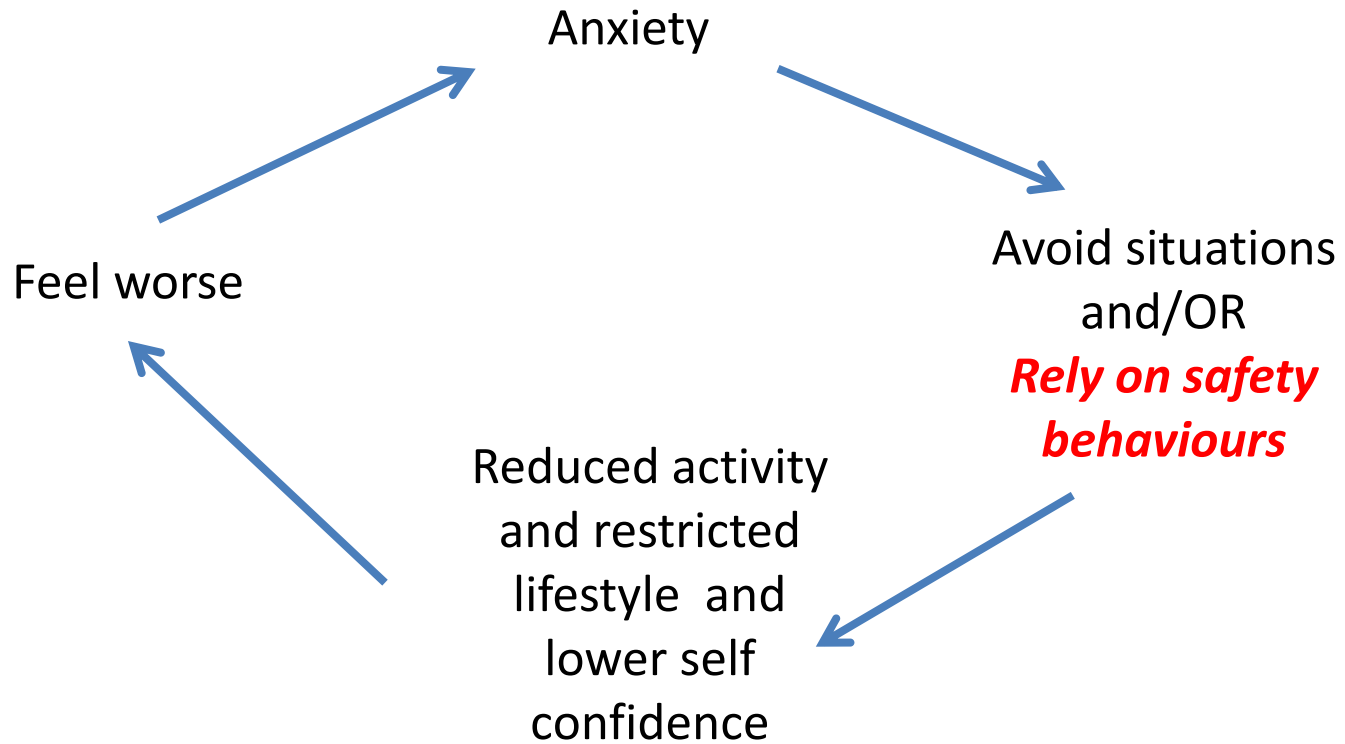
What have you been avoiding?



Subtle ways of avoiding

- There maybe less obvious ways in which you are trying to avoid the situation or the anxiety it causes
- In CBT, we refer to these as “safety behaviours” because they are things that we do in order to try and keep safe.
- However, just like avoidance, in the long term they serve to keep the anxiety going.

The Vicious Cycle of Avoidance (and safety behaviours)



Examples of Safety behaviours

- Leaving anxiety-provoking situations early



- Only going out and doing things when others are there to help you or keep you company



- Rushing through a task or situation as quickly as possible

- Using drink or drugs to block feelings or make you relax more



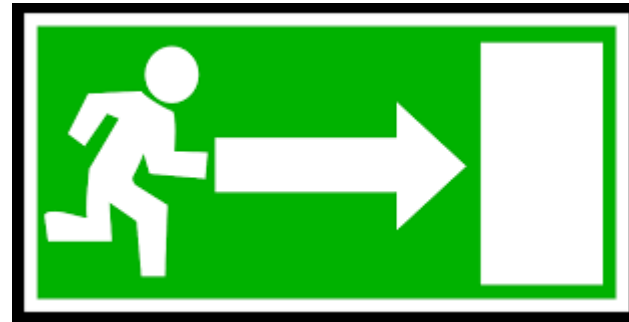
- Taking the easiest option (eg only going to the supermarket late at night)

Examples of Safety behaviours

- Distracting yourself, perhaps trying hard not to think about certain things by keeping busy
- Always having to carry certain items with you, such as water or herbal remedies



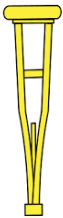
- Always sitting by the exit, on the end of a row or perhaps near the toilet



- Over preparing

What is a safety behaviour and what is a helpful coping strategy?

- Safety behaviours are something we have become overly reliant upon and if it was taken away we feel we wouldn't be able to 'cope'
- Some strategies may seem 'sensible' but we have to be honest with ourselves about how much we are relying upon them to manage



How to tackle avoidance and reduce safety behaviours

- The best way is to plan it step-by-step
- In CBT we use an approach called graded exposure which you might want to learn more about
- But first try and identify what it is you are avoiding that is maintaining your anxiety in the long run, and what more subtle safety behaviours that might also be contributing to this pattern



Next Steps

- Consider learning about how to tackle avoidance using a graded exposure technique
- Write down what situations or tasks you are avoiding
- Remember to include any safety behaviours you may also have
- All worksheets and a PDF are freely available at <https://www.talkplus.org.uk>