

## Safety Behaviors in Adults With Social Anxiety: Review and Future Directions

Marilyn L. Piccirillo

M. Taylor Dryman

Richard G. Heimberg

Temple University

Safety behaviors are considered an important factor in the maintenance of social anxiety disorder (SAD). Safety behaviors are typically employed by socially anxious individuals to reduce anxiety in feared social situations. However, by preventing individuals with social anxiety from gathering evidence that would disconfirm their maladaptive beliefs about social situations, the use of safety behaviors ultimately maintains social anxiety over time. Twenty years ago, Wells and colleagues (1995) demonstrated that use of safety behaviors diminishes the efficacy of exposure treatment for SAD, suggesting that reduction in the use of safety behaviors during exposure can enhance treatment response. Research on safety behaviors has expanded considerably since Wells et al.'s seminal publication, and our understanding of the role safety behaviors may play in the maintenance of social anxiety has grown in breadth and depth. In this paper, we present a detailed review of the published research on safety behaviors relevant to social anxiety and social-anxiety-related processes. Finally, we evaluate the impact of safety behaviors on the outcome of treatment for SAD, and we look to the literature on safety behaviors in other anxiety disorders to inform our understanding of use of safety behaviors during exposure and to facilitate future research in SAD.

**Keywords:** social anxiety disorder; anxiety disorders; social anxiety; safety behaviors; avoidance

FOR OVER TWO DECADES, safety behaviors have been recognized for their negative influence on the onset and maintenance of social anxiety disorder (SAD; Clark & Wells, 1995; Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2014; Hofmann, 2007; Wells et al., 1995). Broadly defined, safety behaviors are actions perceived by an individual as necessary to prevent the occurrence of a feared outcome (e.g., Salkovskis, 1991). For an individual with SAD, these safety-seeking behaviors are often employed in social situations in an attempt to minimize negative evaluation or to reduce anxious feelings without completely avoiding the situation. For instance, a socially anxious individual may attend a party but only speak to familiar people to avoid discomfort or social rejection. Safety behaviors can also take the form of internal processes (Clark, 2001). A socially anxious individual, afraid of making mistakes while speaking publicly, may engage in excessive memorization and fact-checking because he believes that doing so will prevent him from humiliating himself by stumbling over his words. These behaviors may reduce anxiety in the moment, but ultimately, they prevent socially anxious individuals from gathering disconfirmatory evidence related to their social fears and contribute to the maintenance of anxiety into the future.

Although the importance of safety behaviors in the maintenance of clinical anxiety has been asserted by earlier researchers (e.g., Salkovskis, 1991), Wells and colleagues (1995) were the very first to experimentally evaluate their role in social anxiety. Wells et al. (1995) investigated whether use of safety behaviors interfered with the efficacy of exposure to feared social situations. Eight adults with SAD participated in two therapist-guided exposures: one with explicit

Address correspondence to Richard G. Heimberg, Ph.D., Adult Anxiety Clinic, Department of Psychology, Temple University, 1701 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122-6085; e-mail: [heimberg@temple.edu](mailto:heimberg@temple.edu).

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instructions to decrease the use of safety behaviors and one with instructions that did not specifically mention safety behaviors (the “neutral” condition). The “decrease safety behaviors” condition resulted in greater reductions in anxiety, greater reductions of belief in the feared outcome, and higher participant ratings of exposure effectiveness than the “neutral” condition.

With the publication of their seminal paper, Wells and colleagues (1995) provided an important springboard for the study of safety behaviors in social anxiety and their impact on the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for SAD. The purpose of the present paper is to critically review the published research on safety behaviors in social anxiety. In 2010, Helbig-Lang and Petermann conducted a systematic review of the literature on safety behaviors in the anxiety disorders (including health anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD], panic disorder/agoraphobia, SAD, and specific phobias). They highlighted inconsistencies in the definition of safety behaviors and differences in empirical methodology as factors contributing to the mixed findings regarding the influence of safety behaviors on treatment outcome. However, they concluded that safety behaviors are detrimental and should be eliminated over the course of therapy. Although Helbig-Lang and Petermann (2010) provided valuable insight on the effects of safety behaviors in the anxiety disorders, research on the specific nature and effects of safety behaviors in SAD has expanded considerably since that time. Thus, our goal is to systematically examine the impact of safety behaviors on anxiety, social behavior, and related processes among adults with SAD, as well as the effects of safety behaviors on the outcome of exposure-based treatment for SAD. We also examine the relationship of safety behaviors to self-imagery and post-event processing, processes known to be important in SAD, that may also be linked to safety behavior use. We aim to review the research published since the Wells et al. (1995) paper, as well as explore the ways in which safety behaviors may be linked to more nuanced processes related to social anxiety. Finally, we review selected studies on safety behaviors in other anxiety disorders to enhance our understanding of safety behaviors in SAD and inform future research.

### Methods

Relevant studies for this systematic review were identified using PsycINFO (accessed via the EBS-COhost platform) and Google Scholar, as well as a backwards literature search that consisted of scanning references cited in identified articles to evaluate if these references might be relevant to our

search criteria. Our search terms included, “safety behavior” and “anxiety,” as well as specific anxiety disorder terminology (e.g., “social anxiety disorder,” “social phobia”) when appropriate. Eligible articles were limited to empirical studies in peer-reviewed publications that were published between January, 1995 and September, 2015. Our original search yielded 230 articles. We excluded articles that did not pertain to the study of safety behaviors ( $n = 67$ ). We also excluded studies of children and adolescents ( $n = 10$ ), articles not published in English ( $n = 13$ ), and case studies ( $n = 10$ ). Finally, we excluded articles that did not pertain specifically to social anxiety ( $n = 91$ ). Our final publication list included 39 articles.

In addition to the literature on safety behaviors in social anxiety, we also reference select articles on other anxiety disorders, such as specific phobia and OCD. Research on safety behaviors in these disorders has advanced in directions beyond those addressed by the social anxiety literature, and we believe that inclusion of this literature is essential to informing future directions for safety behavior research in SAD.

### Defining and Measuring Safety Behaviors

Safety behaviors have long been defined as attempts to prevent or avoid feared outcomes that are viewed by the anxious individual as threatening or catastrophic (e.g., Salkovskis, 1991). For socially anxious individuals, the feared outcome typically involves social rejection, negative evaluation, or unbearable feelings of anxiety in social situations. Safety behavior use is strongly and positively related to these fears in social anxiety (Moscovitch et al., 2013; Okajima, Kanai, Chen, & Sakano, 2009), suggesting that safety behaviors are strategies utilized to avoid these outcomes for individuals with SAD. Although safety behaviors may reduce anxiety in the moment, they are hypothesized to maintain social anxiety in multiple, related ways. First, using safety behaviors prevents socially anxious individuals from having social experiences that could provide disconfirmatory evidence related to their distorted thoughts or facilitate more adaptive beliefs about social situations (Clark, 2001; Clark & Wells, 1995; Heimberg et al., 2014; Hofmann, 2007; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Salkovskis, 1991; Wells et al., 1995). Second, when socially anxious individuals use safety behaviors in feared social situations, they attribute their success (or the prevention of the feared outcome) to the use of the safety behaviors, rather than their own abilities (Clark, 2001; Clark & Wells, 1995; Heimberg et al., 2014; Wells et al., 1995). Third, safety behaviors may actually increase the likelihood of the feared outcome (Clark & Wells, 1995), as

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