

Finding the safety behaviours

The small things that keep the doubt alive, and how to drop them

A safety behaviour is anything you do to make the situation feel easier to get through: checking, asking, rehearsing, carrying something, sitting near the door, doing it only when someone else is home.

They matter because of what they do to the learning. While one is in place, anything that goes well can be credited to it, so you never learn that you could have handled the anxiety, and the not knowing, without it. That is the main learning, and with OCD it is nearly all of it; finding out that the feared thing did not happen is a useful second lesson where it can be checked. The research does not settle whether to drop them all at once or cut them down in steps (Blakey and Abramowitz, 2016), so we agree the pace together.

Prescribed medication, inhalers, adrenaline pens and other medical equipment are not safety behaviours to drop. Keep taking and carrying them as prescribed, and speak to your doctor before changing anything.

Questions that find them

- What do I do to take the edge off before I go in?
- What am I carrying, checking or holding on to?
- Who do I check with, and what do I ask them?
- What do I do in my head: rehearse, review, count, pray, argue with the thought?
- Which one would be hardest to do without?
- What would someone watching me not notice?

My list

WHAT I DO	WHEN	WHAT IT PROTECTS ME FROM	DROPPED ON

Dropping one

The one I am dropping first

What I think will happen without it

What actually happened

If dropping one outright is too much to start with, drop it in one specific situation and keep it in the others, rather than doing a little of it everywhere.

A worksheet, not treatment, advice about your situation or a diagnosis. It is best used alongside a qualified clinician. If using it makes things worse, stop and speak to your GP or clinician, and in an emergency call 999. Written by Anxiety CBT Ltd and free to print for personal or clinical use, unchanged and with this footer left on. Not for sale. © 2026 Anxiety CBT Ltd · Dr Daniel O'Rourke · anxietycbt.co.uk/resources/safety-behaviours