

# Acting on persecutory delusions: The importance of safety seeking

Daniel Freeman<sup>a,\*</sup>, Philippa A. Garety<sup>a</sup>, Elizabeth Kuipers<sup>a</sup>, David Fowler<sup>b</sup>,  
Paul E. Bebbington<sup>c</sup>, Graham Dunn<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, P.O. Box 77, University of London, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*School of Medicine, Health Policy and Practice, University of East Anglia, UK*

<sup>c</sup>*Department of Mental Health Sciences, Royal Free and University College Medical School, University College London, University of London, UK*

<sup>d</sup>*Biostatistics Group, Division of Epidemiology & Health Sciences, University of Manchester, UK*

Received 28 April 2005; received in revised form 13 January 2006; accepted 26 January 2006

---

## Abstract

**Objective:** Acting on delusions is a significant clinical issue. The concept of safety behaviours—actions carried out with the intention of reducing perceived threat—provides a new way of understanding acting on delusions. A study was conducted with the aim of examining the prevalence and correlates of safety behaviours related to persecutory delusions.

**Method:** One hundred patients with persecutory delusions were assessed for safety behaviours, acting on delusions, anxiety, depression, and psychotic symptoms. Case note data were collected on instances of serious violence or suicide attempts.

**Results:** Ninety-six patients had used safety behaviours in the last month. Greater use of safety behaviours was associated with higher levels of distress. A history of violence or suicide attempts was associated with greater use of safety behaviours. Safety behaviours were significantly associated with acting on delusions, but not with the negative symptoms of psychosis.

**Conclusion:** Safety behaviours are a common form of acting on persecutory delusions. These behaviours have the consequence that they are likely to prevent the processing of disconfirmatory evidence and will therefore contribute to delusion persistence.

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Schizophrenia; Psychosis; Delusions; Persecutory; Cognitive

---

## Introduction

In the 1990s an empirical literature emerged indicating that acting on delusions is common (Applebaum, Robbins, & Roth, 1999; Buchanan et al., 1993; Wessely et al., 1993). It was found that persecutory delusions

---

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [d.freeman@iop.kcl.ac.uk](mailto:d.freeman@iop.kcl.ac.uk) (D. Freeman).

are those most likely to be acted upon, that the actions are seldom violent, and that the responses are associated with negative emotions such as feeling sad or fearful. However, little is understood about why people act on delusions.

One potential route to understanding acting on persecutory delusions is through the concept of safety behaviours. At the heart of persecutory delusions are threat beliefs (Freeman, Garety, Kuipers, Fowler, & Bebbington, 2002; Freeman & Garety, 2004). Individuals believe that they are to suffer physical, social, or psychological harm. Many instances of acting on persecutory delusions may be anxious attempts to seek safety and prevent the perceived threat from occurring. Thus, safety behaviours are acting on delusions, but can be distinguished from the totality of such actions because of their intent. In this article, we investigate the prevalence and correlates of safety seeking in 100 individuals with persecutory delusions, the relationship with an established measure of acting on delusions, and whether the withdrawal often used as a safety behaviour is associated with negative psychotic symptoms.

### *Safety behaviours*

Individuals who feel threatened often carry out actions designed to prevent their feared catastrophe from occurring; this has been termed ‘safety behaviour’ (Salkovskis, 1991). When the perceived threat is a misperception, such as in anxiety disorders and paranoia, there are important consequences. Individuals fail to attribute the absence of catastrophe to the incorrectness of their threat beliefs. Rather, they believe that the threat was averted only by their safety behaviours (e.g. ‘The reason I wasn’t attacked was because I left the street in time and made it back home’). What are actually instances of the incorrectness of threat beliefs are instead turned into ‘near misses’. Threat beliefs are likely to persist partly due to this failure to obtain and process disconfirmatory evidence. Manipulation studies have tested the idea that safety behaviours maintain anxiety disorders (e.g. Salkovskis, Clark, Hackmann, Wells, & Gelder, 1999; Sloan & Telch, 2002; Wells et al., 1995). It has been found that exposure plus decreased use of safety behaviours leads to greater reductions in threat beliefs and anxiety than exposure alone, consistent with the maintenance hypothesis.

The concept of safety behaviours was developed in cognitive accounts of anxiety disorders (e.g. Clark, 1999; Salkovskis, Clark, & Gelder, 1996), but has since been applied to persecutory delusions (e.g. Morrison, 1998). Freeman, Garety, and Kuipers (2001) used a semi-structured interview—the Safety Behaviours Questionnaire—with 25 individuals with current persecutory delusions. It was found that all of the individuals had used safety behaviours in the past month. The most common type of safety behaviour was avoidance. For example, people would avoid going to the local shops or on buses where they feared attack. Apart from avoiding the situations perceived as most dangerous, the individuals also carried out actions to lessen the threat directly. When they felt they were in imminent danger they sought protection (e.g. would only leave the home with a trusted person), took steps to decrease their visibility (e.g. alternated routes and the time of return home), enhanced their vigilance (e.g. looking up and down the street), or acted as if they would resist attack (e.g. prepared to strike out). Further, a smaller proportion of people would try to comply with their persecutors (e.g. trying to do things that they thought the persecutors wanted them to do such as keeping the television volume low) or adopt the opposite behaviour of confronting them (e.g. shouting at neighbours). Greater use of safety behaviours was associated with higher levels of anxiety. The safety seeking appeared to be motivated by fear.

The main aim of the current study was to examine the presence and correlates of safety behaviours in a larger sample of individuals with persecutory delusions using the Safety Behaviours Questionnaire. It was predicted that safety behaviours would be present in the majority of individuals with persecutory delusions and would be associated with higher levels of emotional distress. The second aim of the study was to assess the degree of overlap between acting on delusions, as assessed by the main instrument used in the 1990s, the Maudsley Assessment of Delusions Schedule (Wessely et al., 1993), and safety behaviours as assessed by the Safety Behaviours Questionnaire (Freeman et al., 2001). The MADs assesses a broad range of actions associated with delusions, including, for example, whether the person has written to anyone, whether they have lost their temper, and whether their belief has stopped them from watching television or listening to the radio. We predicted significant associations between the

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات