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Chapter 4

What keeps your fear going?

We have discussed the three components of anxiety – bodily feelings, anxious thoughts and behaviours. And we have referred to the way behaviours and thoughts maintain fear. Let's summarise the three main reasons why fear persists:

- **Negative predictions** or thoughts about car travel may lead to an exaggerated perception of danger. You may not even be aware of this.
- When you **avoid**, or largely avoid the situations you fear, the fear either stays the same, or gets worse.
- If you use excessive **safety-seeking behaviours** in the car, you never learn that you would be safe without them.

Anxious thoughts and avoidance behaviours prepare you to be easily **resensitised**. By this we mean that when a situation occurs, such as a vehicle ahead braking unexpectedly, which before the accident you would have easily dismissed, it now feeds your anxiety further. Your perceptions of danger are reinforced, your safety-seeking behaviours are maintained, and the adrenaline flow continues at inappropriate times.

Thoughts and avoidance

As we have said, if you become fearful of driving after an accident, you may try to avoid car travel as much as possible, or restrict yourself to short journeys on familiar local routes, because you think that this will reduce the likelihood of another accident happening that way.

You may think “*Cars are dangerous, and I can’t bear being in them anymore*”. The first part of this statement can’t be contradicted, of course. Cars (like many things in this world) are dangerous in certain circumstances. However, every day we do many things which are dangerous **without thinking about the danger**. The problem is that our fearful thinking has become **exaggerated**. Because we have had one accident, we over-anticipate the possibility of another. Avoiding car travel means that exaggerated thinking is never proven incorrect.

It is natural to avoid something which makes you feel uncomfortable, and in the short-term you might feel relieved and more relaxed by avoiding car travel. In the long-term, however, avoiding does not get rid of the problem, and for some people things can get worse and worse, with them becoming frightened of more and more situations.

It is normal to want to protect yourself when you feel at risk, but putting up the protective screen prevents you finding out what would happen without it.

Avoidance – the vicious circle

The principle of avoidance is this: **If each time you avoid a feared situation, you feel better, then it is more likely that the next time the feared situation crops up, you will avoid it again.** At the same time you never learn that you can cope with the feared situation, and the fear remains. Literally, this is a vicious circle.



Now, answer this question:

<p><i>What would happen if you did something you find hard, like face a situation you find frightening for a longer time, rather than cut your time as short as possible? Would your anxiety ...</i></p>	<p>a) Get worse b) Stay the same c) Decrease</p>
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