

Responding to Reassurance-Seeking

How to help someone you care about reduce their reassurance-seeking behavior

What is reassurance-seeking?

Reassurance seeking involves asking others for their thoughts on a topic, often to gain understanding or feel more sure about something. Everybody seeks reassurance at times, when we feel anxious or are dealing with situations where we are uncertain. We may ask loved ones (e.g., partner, family, friends) for their opinions, or seek reassurance from others (e.g., co-workers, healthcare professionals, salespeople, etc.).

Why do people seek reassurance?

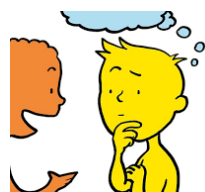
There are many reasons people look for reassurance, including:

Anxiety: Fear about possible negative outcomes, making a mistake, or being wrong (e.g. “Did I say the wrong thing?”).

Fear of judgement: Concerns about what others think (e.g. “Do I look weird in this?”, “Are you/they upset with me?”).

Uncertainty: Wanting to feel in control when things are uncertain (e.g. “What if I fail the exam?”).

When is reassurance-seeking unhelpful?



For some people, this behaviour can become a problem when they seek reassurance too often or it starts to negatively impact their lives.

Signs that it may be a problem include:

Anxiety and distress: The person may feel anxious or distressed if they can't seek reassurance. They rely on others to calm them down and may lose the ability to soothe themselves.

Overdoing it: The reassurance seeking becomes a regular part of communication. You may notice they have started to seek reassurance for smaller everyday issues (e.g. what to wear, buy, say etc).

Relief is short-lived: Reassurance may make them feel better for a little while, but the worry or urge keeps coming back, so they keep asking for reassurance even when it has already been given many times.

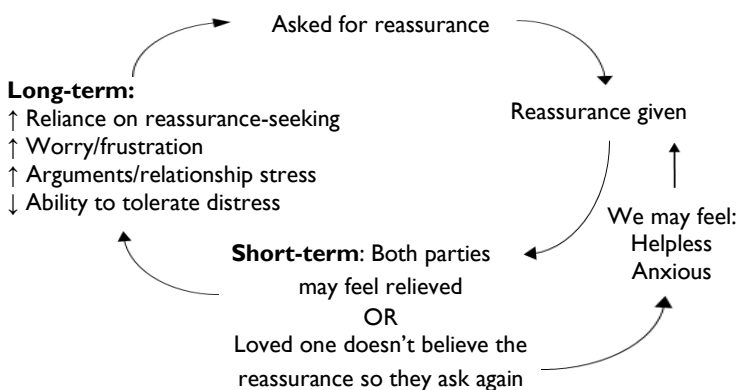
Indecision/inaction: The person cannot make decisions or take action unless reassurance is provided by someone else.

Relationship conflict: Relationships can be affected as we don't know how to respond or help. The person can seem like they are not listening or taking advice.

Frustration/sadness: As a loved one, you may feel helpless or frustrated as you can't seem to help the person you care about.



The vicious cycle of reassurance-seeking (from a carers perspective)



As you can see, both the person asking for reassurance and the person giving reassurance can feel better for a little while once reassurance is given. We can see why we do it! We don't want to see our loved one upset. However, in the long term this only keeps the problem going.

Over time, the vicious cycle of reassurance-seeking can keep several problems going for our loved one including chronic worry, health anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, body image/eating disorder concerns, and low self-esteem.

To help change reassurance-seeking we need to try and break the unhelpful cycle. Here are some ways to help...

Open Communication; Responding differently and Looking after yourself ...

1) Open communication



Do they want help? If your loved one would like some support to reduce their reassurance-seeking, it can be helpful to discuss this with them. Changing any longstanding behaviour without telling the other party can be very distressing and confusing for everyone involved.

Being on the same page: When both sides know what to expect, and agree on the strategies to be used, this can help stay on track and reduce the chances of getting into an argument or experiencing feelings of rejection or guilt.

Remembering the long term benefit: Remember that breaking old habits is not easy. At the beginning, it's common to feel more anxious or frustrated. It can be tempting to return back to seeking and giving reassurance! Staying on the same page can be a reminder to you both that you are working towards the same long term goal of being free from the need for reassurance, which will increase confidence, self esteem and hopefully improve your relationship.



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2) Responding differently

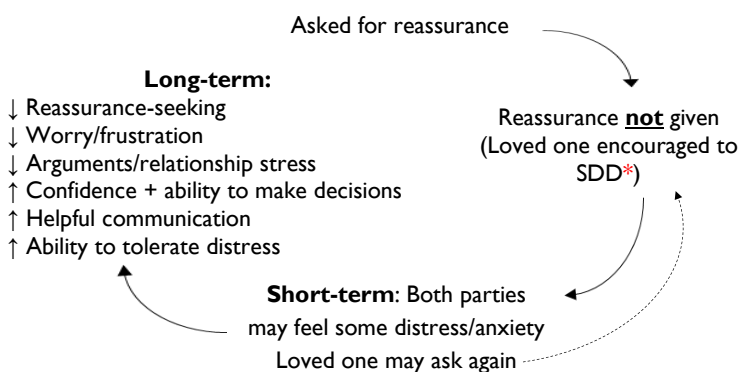
To break the unhelpful cycle of reassurance seeking we can learn to change how we respond to the person we care about. This involves:

Stepping in their shoes: Remember, the person you care feels anxious and thinks they need reassurance to feel safe. They are not doing this on purpose. If they could stop, they would, but they often don't know how to. Fear keeps them stuck. Understanding this can help us be more supportive.

Remembering the goal: The goal is to help them learn to handle their own discomfort (sit with it) without needing reassurance. This will help them become more confident in their own abilities.

Not providing reassurance: We can help break the cycle reassurance-seeking by not giving reassurance when asked. This is hard to do when all we want is to make them feel better quickly! But remember, they will feel better in the long term, in fact they will be free from feeling trapped by their anxiety.

Breaking the cycle of reassurance –seeking.



Helpful tips for responding differently



Instead of giving reassurance (e.g., “You’ll be fine”), judging the person (“Why do you keep asking? You’re doing this on purpose”), or dismissing/avoiding the issue (e.g., “Don’t worry. Stop thinking about it.”), here are some helpful ways to respond to reassurance-seeking:

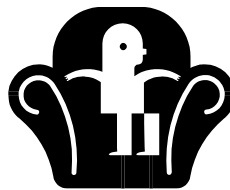
- **Listen to the concern before reacting:** You may feel pressure to react immediately; see if you can pause and take some time to think before you respond.
- **Validate how the person is feeling:** e.g., “I can see you’re worried about this.” or “I know this is very upsetting for you.” You can acknowledge their emotions or how difficult their experience must be without responding directly to the topic of the reassurance.
- **Remind of strategies:** If your loved one has been attending therapy, kindly encourage them to consider what strategies they have learnt that they can use in this situation. Remind them of what strategy has worked previously. Be familiar with

*‘Stop; Drop; Delay’ strategies (outlined in the handout “Reducing Reassurance Seeking”) and remind them that these are options.

- **Remember it will pass:** Anxiety is an urge that will pass (for both you and your loved one!).
- **Support the helpful plan:** Your loved one may require some help from you to plan and use these strategies, but let them take the lead. Be careful not to take responsibility for solving their problem or anxieties.
- **Consistent message and caring tone:** Try not to judge, instead understand they are scared. Let them know you are there for them in many ways, but answering their reassurance is not one of them. You can best help them in the long term by being consistent with your message and tone.

3) Looking after yourself

It is important to handle your own anxiety or discomfort to be able to help others. It is natural to want to make your loved one feel better by providing reassurance, so it can be very uncomfortable to act against this instinct. Your loved one may become more upset or frustrated when you do not offer reassurance. Remember that change takes time and setbacks can happen. To do this we have to look after ourselves and learn to manage our own discomfort!



If you think you need extra support with tolerating distress, some of our other resources might help:

- [“Facing Your Feelings” workbook.](#)
- [“Postpone your worry” handout.](#)
- “Anxiety surfing” handout.

Other helpful strategies may include:

- Learning to be more present (e.g. practicing [mindfulness](#) exercises).
- Moving each day (e.g. going for gentle walks or engaging in vigorous movement, whatever suits you).
- Learning what gives you enjoyment and pleasure - trying new things and planning this into your week!
- Staying connected to others.
- Maintaining helpful/balanced routines (e.g. regular sleep, meals).
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation \(PMR\)](#) - notice when you are carrying extra tension and learn to release this.
- See your GP or seek your own psychological support .

