

Health Anxiety

A self help guide

Shining a light on the future



A booklet to help people who worry too much about health

“I am always at the doctor’s surgery. That is because I often worry about having something wrong with me. Last week it was tingling in my hands and arms. I thought it was the first sign of something like M.S. The doctor did some tests and said it was nothing to worry about. At first I felt better, but this week I have had a headache too, maybe I should go back just to make sure.....”

“I often have worrying symptoms that must be the sign of something serious. The doctors have found nothing yet. I make sure that I rest a lot so I don’t strain myself. I don’t travel away from my own town, I want to be near our own doctors. My wife tells me nothing is wrong but that only makes me feel better for a few minutes. I just feel I must keep checking how I am every day.....”

These are the thoughts of two people who suffer from health anxiety. That means that they worry a lot about their health. This focus on health makes their symptoms seem worse. Much of their time is taken up with these worries. And reassurance from a doctor that nothing is wrong doesn’t seem to help for long.

If you find yourself with many troublesome worries about your health you may be experiencing health anxiety. The rest of this booklet can help you to think about this. It tells you about the signs of health anxiety and how you may help yourself to manage this difficulty.

Isn’t it normal to worry about health?

We all worry about our health from time to time, for example, if we had to go into hospital for an operation, or if we are recalled by our doctor following tests. Worrying about our health can lead us to improve our lifestyle, for example, to give up smoking or to eat a healthy diet.

When does worrying about our health become a problem?

Health worries become a problem when they begin to get in the way of normal life even though there is no reason to think that anything is seriously wrong.

This booklet may also help people who have a health problem but find that they worry too much about it.

What are the signs of health anxiety?

You may be experiencing health anxiety if you **worry about your health** a lot of the time when there is no medical reason to do this, and how you lead your life is affected by this. You may often **seek comfort or reassurance** from other people that everything is all right. This may be from family, friends, or your doctor.

You may find you are **checking your body for symptoms**, and that the more you check, the more you seem to notice strange feelings or lumps in your body. You may **avoid certain activities** as if you were ill, and you may avoid anything to do with illness e.g. information or medical programmes on the television.

On the other hand some people with health anxieties find themselves **drawn to any information** about illnesses and can begin to notice the signs of such illness in themselves.

Am I suffering from health anxiety?

Anxiety of any sort can affect us in at least four different ways. It affects:

- The way we feel
- The way we think
- The way our body works
- The way we behave

In order to check out whether you may be suffering from health anxiety, please place a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly:

How you feel

- Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened
- A feeling of dread
- Tense, stressed, uptight, on edge, unsettled
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached
- Panicky
- Feeling tired or unwell

How you think

- Constant worrying about health
- Imagining the worst and dwelling on it
- Thoughts about illnesses and symptoms
- Concentrating on parts of your body and symptoms
- Thinking that the doctor may be able to help

- Thinking that if you don't worry, you are tempting fate
- Worrying that the doctor may have missed something
- A belief that unless you keep an eye on things you may miss signs of a serious illness
- Beliefs that you may have something terribly wrong but you don't want to think about it
- Thinking that your family/friend may know if this symptom seems serious
- Wish you could consult the doctor but fear he or she now thinks of you as a time waster or does not take you seriously

Common thoughts

- "This must be cancer"
- "I feel I am unwell"
- "Surely a headache like this can't be just stress"
- "That tingling seems like it may be the first sign of a stroke"
- "I may die if I don't do something"
- "Doctors often miss illnesses despite examinations and tests"
- "Some new symptoms have come since I last spoke with the doctor, it may be more serious than he thought"

What you do

- Go to the doctor's surgery very frequently
- Ask family and friends for reassurance about your symptoms
- Frequently check your body for symptoms such as lumps or bumps, tingling and pain
- Focus on one area of the body for changing sensations
- Avoid any information on serious illnesses e.g. turn the TV off if a hospital programme is on
- Seek out any information on serious illnesses, and check for those symptoms (books, Internet, TV)
- Act as if you were ill, for example, avoiding exertion or exercise, keeping near to home, resting

What happens to your body?

These are typical in all types of anxiety

- Heart pounds, races, skips a beat
- Chest feels tight or painful
- Tingling or numbness in toes, fingers or arms
- Stomach churning, “butterflies”
- Having to go to the toilet frequently
- Feeling jumpy or restless
- Headache
- Tense muscles
- Body aching
- Sweating
- Breathing changes
- Dizzy, light headed
- ‘Odd’ sensations in various parts of body

If you are regularly suffering from some or all of these symptoms, then it is possible that you are suffering from health anxiety.

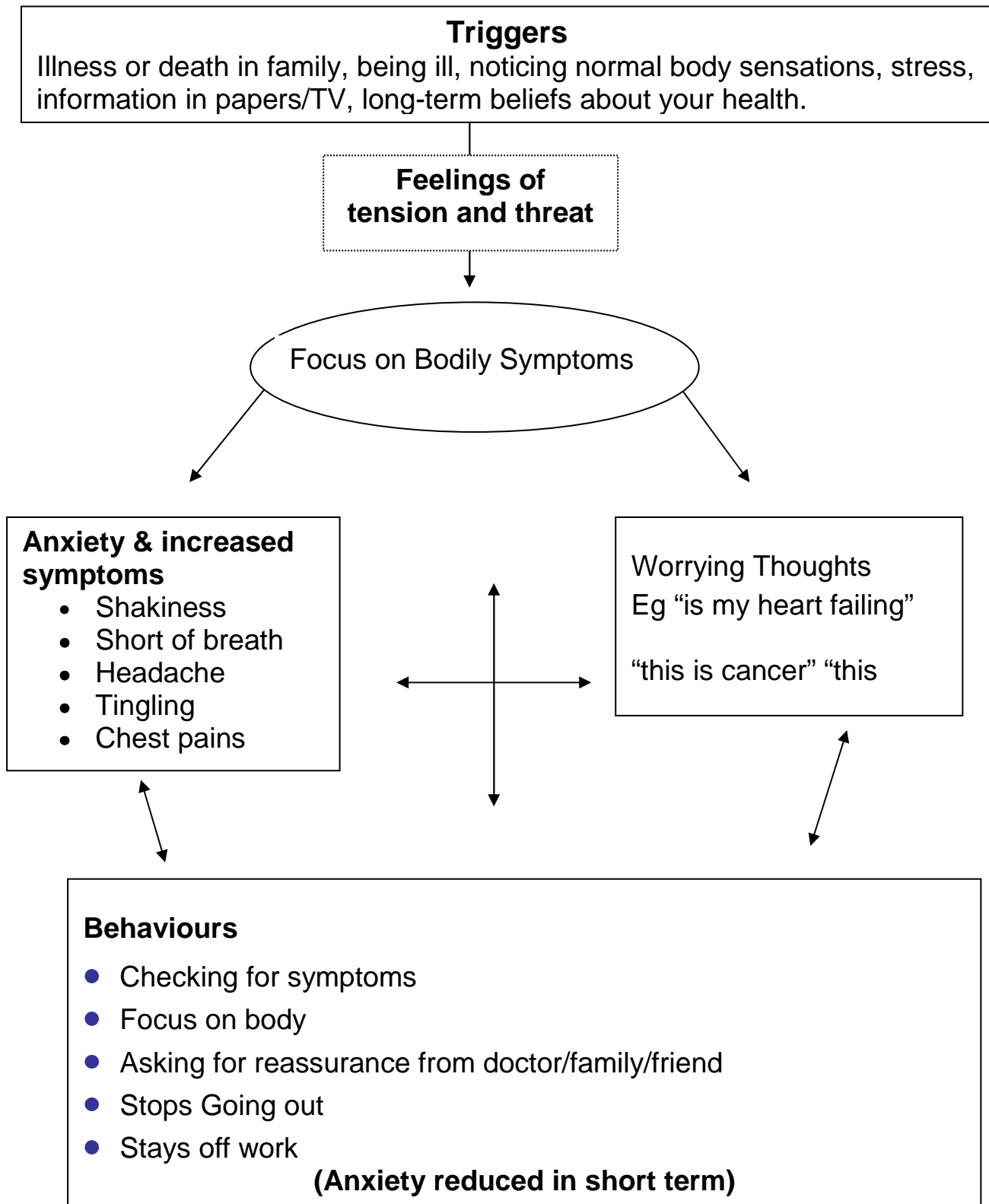
What causes health anxiety?

There are many reasons why someone worries too much about their health. You may be going through a particularly stressful period of your life. There may have been illness or death in your family, or another family member may have worried a lot about your health when you were young.

What keeps health anxiety going?

People with health anxiety have their normal day-to-day life badly affected by their worries about health. This often continues despite tests and reassurances that no medical condition justifies this concern.

In health anxiety, a vicious circle keeps the problem going:



From this vicious circle of health anxiety we can see that there are certain things that keep a health anxiety going.

What are the things I might do that keep health anxiety going?

Everyone has different worries but there are six main things that you may tend to do that will keep health anxiety as a major problem for you. We will describe each in turn and you may want to jot down your own particular difficulties in each area. This will begin to help you to be clear what difficulties you need to work on with the help of later parts of this booklets.

1. Focus on symptoms and the body, checking and monitoring

When we focus on one part of the body, we tend to notice physical sensations and symptoms that we were unaware of before, and even bumps and lumps in that body part. The more you focus on one area or symptom, the more you notice it. Think of what happens when someone mentions head lice! People with health anxiety tend to find these symptoms and sensations worrying and check them very frequently. This focus can also include squeezing, prodding, scratching and mirror gazing.

Do you have a symptom, sensation, body part or lump/bump that you have focussed on a lot? It may help to write it down.

2. Worrying thoughts about symptoms and health information

People with health anxiety tend to have unhelpful thoughts about bodily symptoms and other health information. Here are some examples:

Jumping to conclusions:

- “If the doctor sent me for tests she must be really worried”
- “A headache like that must be something serious”

Do you ever think like this, if yes jot down your thoughts here:

Catastrophising:

- “It could kill me in months”
- “My children will be left without a mother before they are at school”

If you ever think like this jot down those thoughts or images here:

All or nothing thinking:

- “If I have any symptoms then there must be something seriously wrong with me”
- “I need to have all possible tests or else something may have been missed”

If you have had similar thoughts jot them down here:

Emotional Reasoning:

- “I feel something is wrong so there must be something wrong”
- “This tension must be caused by a serious illness”

If you have had similar thoughts jot them down here:

3. Getting reassurance or comfort from others

It is common for people to seek reassurance from others if they are worried. People with health anxiety often seek comfort from friends and family or their doctor. This reassurance works at first and they feel a little less worried. This does not last and the worry is soon back. People can get into a habit of asking for reassurance very often. This keeps the symptoms very much in their mind and usually makes them feel worse. If reassurance does not work for you the first or second time it may actually be keeping your worry going.

Write down who you ask to give comfort and reassurance for health worries and how often you ask them to reassure you:

4. Finding out about illness

Sometimes finding out too much information about illness can increase worries and make people focus on new symptoms or body areas. Books, magazines, the Internet and partial information from your doctor can lead to this.

Write down some times you may have done this:

5. Avoidance

Sometimes avoiding things to do with illness can keep your worries going, for example, you may turn the TV over as Casualty comes on, or shut a newspaper that describes AIDS. Sometimes people also avoid exercise or activity because of a fear that it will bring on illness. This can lead to low mood and an increase of symptoms because of loss of fitness.

Can you think of times when you may have avoided information or activities because of worries about your health?

6. Deeper beliefs that make you likely to worry about health

Certain long held beliefs can lead us to have health anxieties

- Bodily changes are always a sign that something is wrong
- If I worry about it, then at least I'm prepared for the worst
- I'm prone to cancer/heart problems/stroke; we have a family history of it and I'm sure to get it
- Doctors often make mistakes
- Extensive tests are the only way to know you are well
- If I'm not 100% sure that I am well, then I am likely to be ill. I can't risk that

To summarise:

- Worrying about health is quite normal from time to time
- Health anxiety becomes a problem when it gets in the way of normal life, even though there is no reason to think anything is seriously wrong
- People with health anxiety often:
 - Seek comfort or reassurance from others
 - Frequently check their body for symptoms
 - Avoid information about health or seek out too much information
 - Avoid activity as if they were ill
 - Have unrealistic worrying thoughts and beliefs about health

The next section suggests some ways of coping with health anxiety

How can I cope with health anxiety?

It may help you to draw up a 'vicious daisy' of health anxiety to begin to understand and cope with your difficulty.

Where there are dotted lines write down thoughts, feelings, or things you do when worrying about your health.



Why should I try and stop worrying about my health, isn't that dangerous?

- You can **never** be sure that your health is perfect
- You can **waste** a lot of time worrying that something is seriously wrong
- Imagine that you are 90 years old and looking back on your life. You think of all those years wasted in worry about health
- If you think about one part of your body for too long you are bound to notice **strange sensations**. Try focusing on your throat for a few minutes – swallow three times. Notice how this focus brings on difficulty in swallowing and sensations in that area
- What good things could you do if you were not worrying about health?

Try making a list of the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to worry about your health. An example is given first.

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|--|
| e.g. "I get relief in the short term when my husband says no, that doesn't feel like a lump to him" | e.g. "In the longer term I have to ask him again and again if I am alright and I get very tense, and he gets cross with me". |

How can I stop asking for reassurance from the doctor and other people?

Asking for comfort or reassurance including going to the doctor for tests makes you feel better in the short term, but tends to make you think more about your health and become more anxious in the longer term.

Try to keep a record of how many times you ask for comfort and how worried you felt each day.

Below is an example of a record made by John who has begun to reduce the number of times he asked for reassurance or comfort that he did not have cancer.

| | MON | TUE | WED | THU | FRI | SAT | SUN |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Times asked for reassurance or comfort each day | 10 | 10 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Worry (0 – 10) 0 = No worry 10 = Very Worried | 9 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 2 |

Reducing the number of times you ask for reassurance or comfort will make you less anxious in the long term.

It may help to distract yourself, try to do something active such as going for a walk. Keep busy; you can try to delay asking for comfort. You can try to ask for comfort a little less each day over a week.

How can I stop my focus on symptoms and the body?

Focus on the body including squeezing, prodding, scratching and mirror gazing can lead to increase in symptoms and will make you feel very anxious.

You can make a plan to gradually reduce the number of checks you allow yourself to do each day. Here is an example of a plan made by Mary who checks her skin for lumps 30-40 times each day.

| | Mon | Tues | Wed | Thur | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|------------------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Number of checks | 35 | 30 | 20 | 15 | 10 | 5 | 2 |

As you reduce the number of checks you should begin to feel less anxious about your health.

How can I stop myself finding out too much about illness?

We know that too much focus on illness can lead people to focus on their bodies and symptom. This can increase health anxieties. If this is something you do, you may try to stop this by:

- Not reading medical books, looking at medical Internet sites or reading medical articles in magazines. You should not watch every medical programme
- Get your family or friends to support you in this
- Try and find other ways of coping with anxiety.

Keep a record of the number of times you looked for illness information.

Here is an example of a plan made by Jill who is trying to reduce the number of times she looks at information on cancer.

| | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 |
|----------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Internet | 30 | 15 | 7 | 0 |
| TV | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Books | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 |

How should I stop behaving as if I am ill?

Some people who worry about their health stop doing things because they worry it will bring on illness. This has the effect of making you less healthy and fit, and in the long run it will lower your mood and increase health risks.

It is important to return to normal activities.

Start by making a list of things you have avoided because of health anxiety. Peter worries about his heart. Here is his list:

| Things avoided |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Going to the pub at night● Walking the dog● Walking into town● Sex● Game of football with friends● Fast walking up stairs |

Next make a step-by-step plan to introduce activity. Here is Peter's plan to begin to get more active:

| | | |
|-------------------------|--------|---|
| Week 1 | Step 1 | Each day: Walk faster up stairs Walk the dog |
| Week 2 Step 2 | Step 2 | Walk into town twice Go to pub |
| Week 3 Step 3 | Step 3 | All of above + Sex |
| Week 4 Step 4 | Step 4 | All of above + Football |

You can try a similar plan.

How can I alter worrying thoughts about my health?

We have already explained that some ways of thinking can make health anxiety worse. These thoughts can also be pictures in your mind.

The best way to stop these worrying thoughts is to think other less anxious, more balanced thoughts.

Here are some examples of how you can do this

| Worrying thought/picture | Balanced thought |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Any new body change/symptom is a sign of something serious... I seem to have a lot of headaches just now...” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “People have body changes and symptoms all the time, it is normal and it is rarely a sign of serious illness ... headaches are often a sign of stress...” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Lots of tests are the only way to know you are well...I may be unwell and don't know it...” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “You cannot have tests all of the time... there is no way to be 100% sure you are well ... better not to waste time worrying about it...” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “My family has a history of heart problems... I'm just waiting and watching for when it happens to me...” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I have discussed this with my doctor and she tells me I am fine. Constant checking is just stressful and bad for my health, I should just try and relax...” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Picture in my head of family around my hospital bed and I am seriously ill...” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “What is the point in thinking this way... yes some day I will die but is it useful to think about it all the time now?” |

Remember if you have health anxiety you will tend to view any information, however neutral, as a sign that something is seriously wrong! Watch out for this and challenge this habit.

It can help to keep a diary of worrying thoughts and more balanced thoughts. Think back to recent health worries and try to do this now. Give reasons for more balanced thought.

| Worrying thought | Balanced thought and reasons for that thought |
|------------------|---|
| | |

Where can I find further help for health anxiety?

We hope you will use the advice in this booklet. You should find it helpful. If you feel you need more help you should discuss this with your GP who will tell you about alternative treatments and local services. There are a number of self help booklets other people have found helpful. These books may be available for your local library.

Suggested Books:

- **Understanding Health Anxiety.** C. Kuchemann and O. Sanders. A cognitive behavioural approach to understanding and managing worries about health. OCTC booklets available to order on: Telephone 01865 223 986 or www.octc.co.uk/html/self-help.html
- **Stop Worrying About Your Health.** G. Zgourides. New Harbinger (2002) (ISBN 157724285X).
- **Its Not All in Your Head: How Worrying about Your Health Could Be Making You Sick – and What You Can Do about It.** S. Taylor and G. Asmundson. Guildford Publications (2005) (ISBN 1572509938).

Written by Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust.

This leaflet can be made available in a range of formats on request (eg Braille, audio, large print). Please contact the Patient Information Centre on Tel: 0191 223 2545

Published by the Patient Information Centre

2009 Copyright

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

Ref, PIC/94/0209 February 2009

www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic Tel: 0191 223 2545