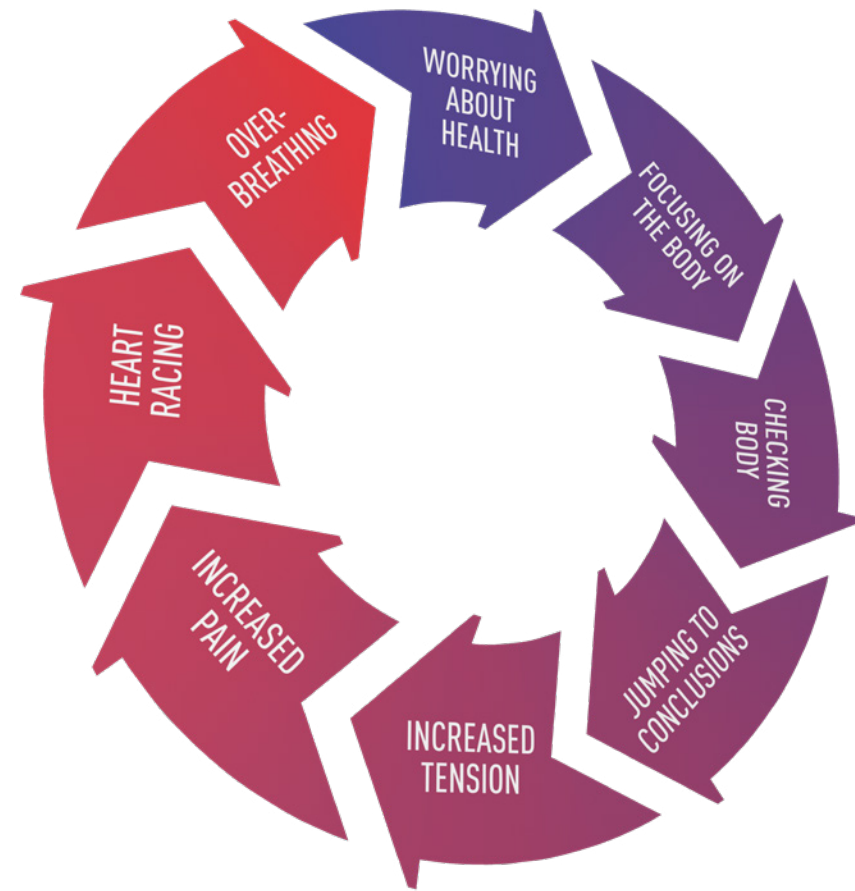


# Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for **Health Anxiety**



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## USEFUL WEBSITES

CLAHRC-EM

 [www.clahrc-em.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.clahrc-em.nihr.ac.uk)

Anxiety UK

 [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

The Institute of Mental Health

 [www.institutemh.org.uk](http://www.institutemh.org.uk)

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# INTRODUCTION



**This booklet will help explain health anxiety. Your therapist will probably go through the information with you, as part of understanding how your symptoms and problems work.**



It is important to remember that everyone is different, so some things may not apply to you. You will be offered recordings of your sessions, and will be asked to listen and comment on them.

Some people find it helpful to mark sections of the booklet that are particularly helpful or that don't make sense to you. If you do this, remember to discuss the booklet in your next session.

The information in this booklet will be considered in more detail during your appointments and an individual treatment programme will be devised with you.

## **Who produced this booklet?**

This booklet supports research conducted by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care East Midlands (CLAHRC EM).

CLAHRC EM brings together universities, NHS, industry, local authorities and patient and public partners to get research into practice quicker, to improve services, patient outcomes and achieve "Healthier living for longer" for people of the East Midlands.

## **Helping Urgent Care Users Cope with Distress About Physical Complaints**

Many people make use of Accident & Emergency departments, walk in centres or make an urgent same day GP appointment. The symptoms they experience can be painful and cause distress

if they are not able to be treated. Repeated investigation may not establish the cause.

We want to find out whether Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) over the phone or via video calling improves physical and emotional health.

## **Why is this study important?**

Some people attending urgent care appointments may not receive the best care for their problems. This study will help us understand if providing an additional treatment is helpful.

## **Acknowledgements:**

Original authors: Professor P.M. Salkovskis, Dr H.M.C. Warwick, Dr H. Tyrer

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All cartoons by: Fred Higton  
[www.fridcartoons.com](http://www.fridcartoons.com)

# PART 1: WHAT IS HEALTH ANXIETY?



## OVERVIEW:

1. **Worrying about your health is normal but these concerns cause problems when intense or persistent**
2. **Health anxiety is persistent worry about health and often stems from changes in physical sensations, behaviour and worrying thoughts**
3. **Vicious cycles can begin when worrying thoughts lead to worrying sensations, which fuel worrying thoughts again**
4. **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (or CBT) has been shown to be effective in the treatment of Health Anxiety**



Everyone experiences anxiety. We get anxious about meeting new people, giving a talk to a group, passing a test or interview, or whether we will get somewhere on time. One of the most common types of anxiety is anxiety focused on health. This is not surprising, because if something goes wrong with your health it could have negative effects on almost all areas of your life.

It is normal to experience anxiety from time to time, but when your anxiety is either particularly strong or intense, or particularly persistent, it can cause problems in your life. The programme described in this booklet is intended to make it possible for you to work with your therapist to help you reduce the amount of time you are worried about your health, and to make the anxiety about health less severe and easier to cope with. It will not remove all anxiety about health all of the time, because it is useful to have some health concerns from time to time.

With health anxiety, people focus on the idea that they might be ill. This is usually (but not always) triggered off by noticing a change in their body.



Sometimes, people notice a sensation in their body (for example, they notice that their heart is beating faster than usual or that they have an unexpected pain) or some other type of change (for example noticing a lump where one was not noticed before).

Anxiety about health happens when the person thinks that these things may be a sign that they are suffering from a serious illness, and they cannot get rid of this idea. Some, (but not all) also experience panic attacks.

## AN EXAMPLE OF HEALTH ANXIETY

Three years ago, completely “out of the blue” a 52 year old man experienced chest pain in bed at night. He was rushed to the cardiac intensive care unit at the hospital where it was confirmed that he’d suffered a minor heart attack.

He had successful cardiac bypass surgery and made a good recovery. A follow-up angiogram showed a good result with clear coronary arteries. He was reassured, put on medication and followed up every three months, then six months. Gradually he returned to normal, became more active and returned to work.

Recently he noticed his chest feeling tight. Fearing that this might be a heart problem, he went to his doctor, who after examination told him it was nothing to worry about. But he was, of course, already worried.

Over the coming days and weeks he noticed he had occasional unpleasant palpitations. Because he believed that he might have the early signs of further heart problems, he started to cut down the amount he exercised to try not to strain his heart.

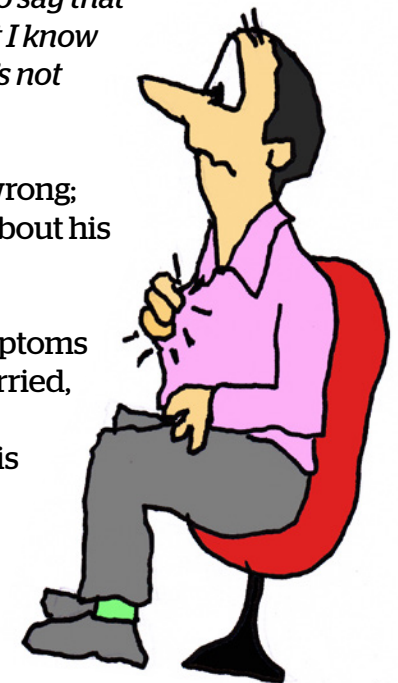
As time went by, he found that when he did anything strenuous he tended to get out of breath easily (because he was becoming unfit, although he didn’t realise this at the time).

As he felt this he became more and more worried, at times struggling for breath. As he did this, the muscles in his chest became even tighter and more painful, which worried him more, because he thought the pains were coming from his heart.

He said; *“It’s all very well for my doctor to say that there’s nothing wrong with my heart, but I know that something must be wrong, even if it’s not with my heart”.*

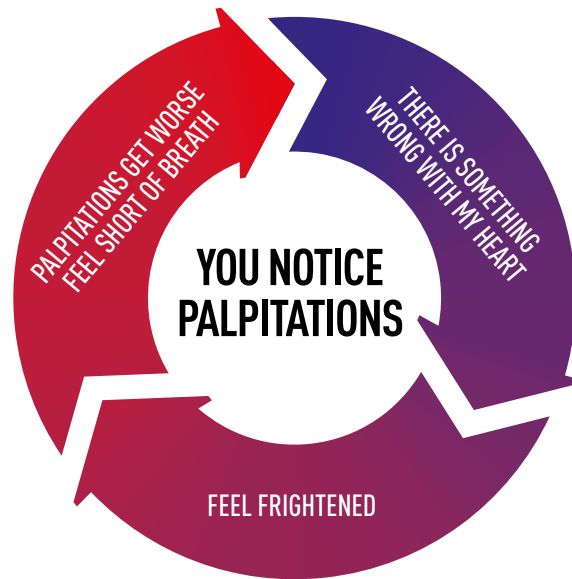
He was correct, there was something wrong; he was suffering from severe anxiety about his health.

It is easy to see how the pattern of symptoms this man developed made him feel worried, and led him to think the worst. It’s also easy to see why it wasn’t enough for this person to be simply told by his doctor that he did not have further heart problems.



## Vicious circles

Vicious circles are an important factor in what keeps health anxiety going. For example, a person notices palpitations. They can then think “Maybe this means that there is something wrong with my heart”. This thought is very frightening; the anxiety makes the person’s body react, so that their heart now beats faster, and this seems to confirm their fear, like this:



This then causes people to become convinced that their symptoms mean that they are seriously ill, when that is not actually true. It is therefore vitally important to know why these thoughts continue, so that they can be dealt with to get rid of the anxiety.

## Worrying thoughts and images

Health Anxiety is always associated with frightening thoughts or sometimes images (mental pictures). Images can be of yourself being ill, the devastating effect this may have on your family or other worrying pictures.

Examples of thoughts experienced by people anxious about their health are:



## PART 2: WHAT IS COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY?

### Summary

So, health anxiety is a combination of frightening thoughts about health and the things which make them persist as part of vicious circles. It is not a “mental illness”, but is a special type of anxiety or stress reaction which makes people focus on their worries about their health and interferes with daily life.

So how do we deal with Health Anxiety?

Cognitive behavioural therapy (or CBT) has been shown to be effective in the treatment of Health Anxiety.



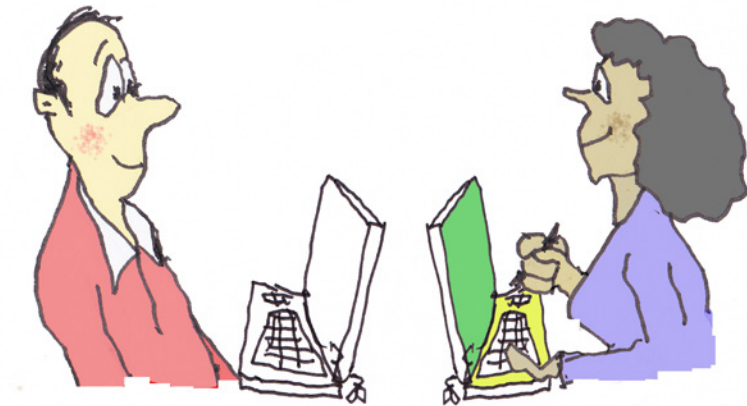
### OVERVIEW:

- 1. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy aims to help you understand the causes of your problems, and interpret experiences in less frightening ways. You can then choose to change how you react**
- 2. Changing thoughts and other reactions towards health is likely to lead to overall improvement in health anxiety**
- 3. There are a number of parts to CBT that can help you get the most from treatment:**
  - **Setting an agenda which tracks your progress**
  - **Building a better understanding of your thoughts and symptoms**
  - **Summarising your progress at the end of each session**
  - **Working between sessions on problems that are identified**
- 4. The intention is for you to become the expert therapist for your own problems**



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**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** will teach you to understand your problem better, and to interpret symptoms and changes in your body in less frightening ways. Special techniques are used to help you identify things which trigger worries about health and the upsetting thoughts you have. Such thoughts lead to changes in behaviour (e.g. checking your body repeatedly and seeking lots of reassurance).



CBT will help you modify these changes in thoughts and behaviour, which is likely to lead to overall reduction in health anxiety. When appropriate, you may also learn techniques that will help to reduce anxiety and the symptoms that are bothering you.

You will be offered up to 10 remotely delivered sessions using an internet system called Webex. Each session will last for up to an hour. Here's what you will need to do.

## **Elements of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**

### **1. Diary and record keeping**

To get the most from each CBT session and keep track of your progress, you may be asked to complete a diary and records of your feelings. These give us important information about your problems. It is important to fill these in as carefully as possible and have them available at your sessions.

### **2. Agenda setting**

To make the best use of each session, you and your therapist will plan an agenda for that session. This may involve looking at diaries and records, discussing any symptoms or worries you have had, what progress you have made with treatment and what problems are left. Decide which issues are the most pressing and how long you want to spend on each one. You will usually accomplish more by tackling things one at a time.



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### 3. Session summary

Towards the end of the session you and your therapist will review what has been accomplished during the session. This is important to make sure you have followed all the things to be learned about your problems in that session. You will also be given a recorded copy of the session to listen to each week, to enhance learning and bring back any questions to your therapist.

### 4. Working at the treatment

In CBT you and your therapist will be working hard to find out what keeps your health anxiety going, so you can overcome it permanently. It has been shown over and over again that reassurance is a very poor way of tackling health anxiety.

This is not surprising, as reassurance is generally intended to show you what is NOT wrong with you. This may work in the short term, but not in the longer term.

The best way of dealing with health anxiety long-term is to learn how your symptoms can be caused and to be reminded of the ways in which you can resolve them.

This allows you to understand what your problem IS rather than what it IS NOT, and lets you develop the skills to deal with health anxiety should it return.

### 5. Homework

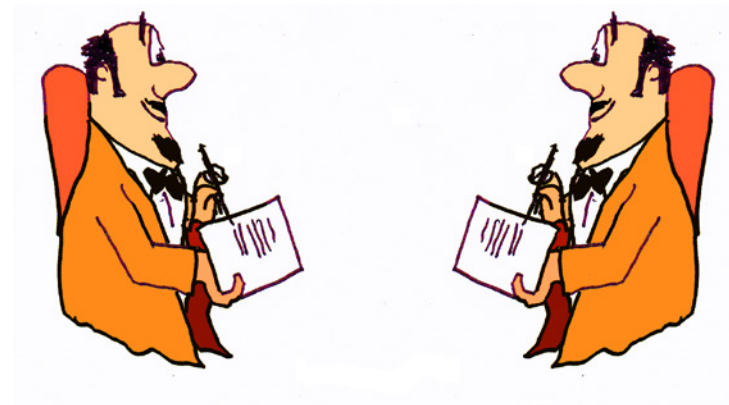
Therapy sessions are for one hour each week and there will be lots of things you will want to follow up between sessions.

You will be asked to perform homework assignments between the sessions and this will speed up your progress in learning to completely control your health anxiety. This is essential in building your confidence and making the most of your therapy.

### 6. Becoming your own therapist

One of the most important goals of cognitive behavioural therapy is for you to learn how to be your own therapist.

You will learn to identify thoughts, beliefs about symptoms, and your behaviour in a broader way, so that if you have any recurrence in the future you will have the skills to deal with them.



## PART 3: WHY HEALTH ANXIETY DOESN'T GO AWAY ON ITS OWN



### OVERVIEW:

- 1. Focusing on your body - You might pay more attention to your body, which can increase worry and make you want to focus on your body even more**
- 2. Checking - You might spend a lot of time checking your body which can make physical symptoms worse and make you check even more**
- 3. Avoidance - When worried about health you might avoid environments you feel put you at greater risk, but this can fuel further worry**
- 4. Rituals - It is common to perform certain tasks in special ways believing that it will reduce the risk of health problems, but it is actually fuelling worry**
- 5. Seeking reassurance - It is natural to want to be reassured nothing is wrong, but doing this repeatedly can make your worries worse and make you seek even more reassurance**
- 6. Effects of worry on the body - Worrying leads to anxiety, which in turn brings about physical changes in the body that might seem like signs of illness, making you worry more**



Many people who consult doctors actually do not have any physical illness. The most common reason for seeing a doctor is being worried about symptoms or sensations and what they might mean.

When we notice something unusual happening to our body, we can quickly decide whether this is a sign of illness and whether we need to see the doctor. Or we may keep an eye on the symptoms then visit the doctor if they do not go away over a longer period.

When we visit the doctor they listen to the details of our symptoms, ask questions and do examinations and tests if required. Once we know that a symptom is not a threat to our health we would normally stop worrying about it, even if it does not go away.

However this sequence can go wrong. For a variety of reasons described later the doctor's reassurance does not work and some people remain unnecessarily worried about symptoms, becoming increasingly convinced that they have a physical illness. Sometimes, the worry can be made worse by being sent for a medical test. This may be to set the patient's mind at rest but the person often thinks "Why is the doctor sending me for tests unless they think there is something seriously wrong with me?" This worrying can often be upsetting and cause people to want to visit the doctor frequently to try to find out what is causing their symptoms.

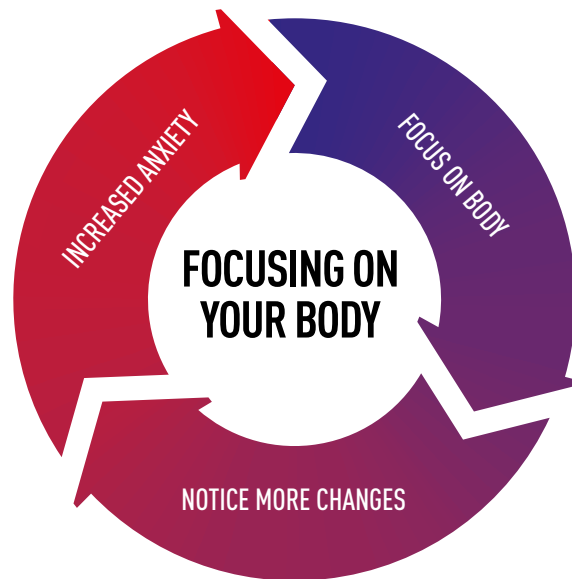
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## The effects of persistent worries about health


Part 1 introduced the idea of vicious circles that keep worries about health going. All health anxiety vicious circles contain the belief that you are seriously ill. Once the belief is there, it has a number of effects:

### 1. Focusing on your body

The idea that you might be ill makes you focus more on your body and you often detect things that you had not noticed before. You may reach the false conclusion that something has changed, and become more worried, which increases your tendency to focus on your body.



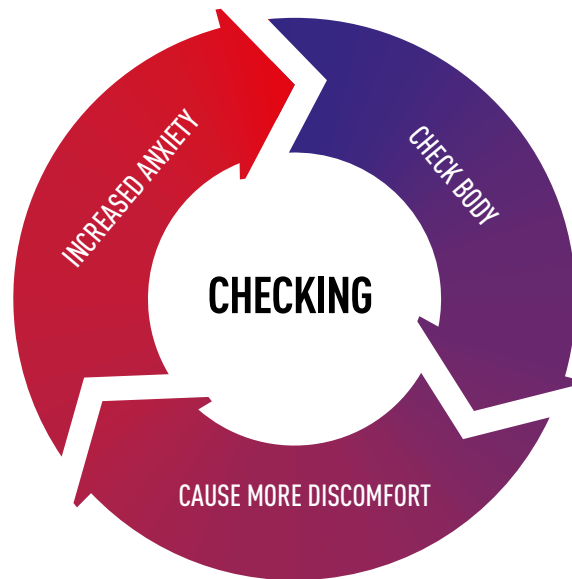
It would be helpful to you if you could write here the ways that paying particular attention to changes in your body affect you personally.




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## 2. Checking

When someone worries about their health it changes what they do. Often, this means checking their body for symptoms to see what is happening. This can focus attention on symptoms (as above), but can also make the symptoms worse in other ways. For example, if someone has a pain and keeps prodding the painful area to see how bad it is, the pain will usually get worse, or rubbing and examining a facial mark can make it more prominent.



List here the behaviours such as checking yourself that you tend to do when you are worried about your health.



### 3. Avoiding


It is common for people with health anxiety to avoid things they think will adversely affect their health. So a man who is unnecessarily afraid that he has heart trouble may avoid running or using flights of stairs, in case he brings on an attack. However each time he avoids these activities, he is reminded of his fears and becomes more worried in the long run.

Other things are avoided too. Some patients avoid discussing health and illness because they become worried. Another patient was too worried to say “I’m fine” if someone asked her how she was because she felt that saying she was fine would “tempt fate” and would then somehow make her ill.

Many patients avoid reading articles or watching programmes about illness, or avoid even reading or saying words like cancer or heart attack. All these types of avoidance are likely to lead to more severe anxieties in the long run.



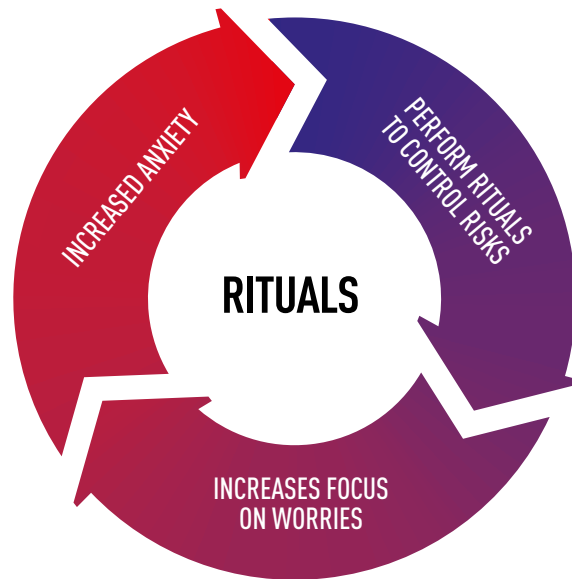
Describe here the effect reassurance has had on you in the past, and ways in which it has been (1) helpful and (2) unhelpful for your health anxiety.




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#### 4. Rituals

We all do rituals to some extent for example- “touching wood” to prevent harm. In patients with health anxiety there are other examples, such as repeated counting and relying on “lucky numbers”, having objects in exactly the same place at all times, cleaning in exactly the same order. Logically such things cannot affect our health but they keep our attention on worries and help to reinforce the problem.



List here any rituals you tend to do when you are worried about your health.



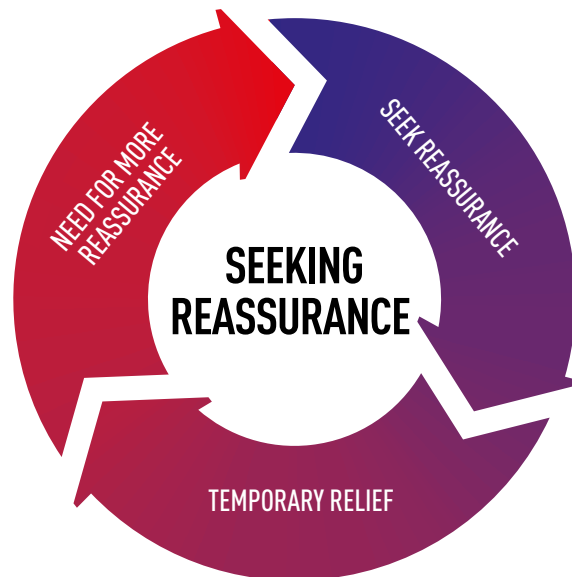
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## 5. Seeking reassurance


Seeking reassurance is understandable, but it can cause problems. If you seek reassurance several times, you can get to the point where it seems that your doctor won't take you seriously.

The immediate effect of reassurance is positive but if the symptoms recur, as they surely will without proper management, the benefit immediately disappears and you will doubt its value.

Sometimes, reassurance accidentally increases worry, because things the doctor says to be helpful can cause further worry.



List here any times when you've sought reassurance but it has not been helpful in the long term.




## 6. The effect of worry on the body

Health anxiety is made worse by the way worrying affects your mood. This can be due to the physical reactions we all experience when we get anxious.

We experience a range of physical changes, many caused by adrenaline which is released when we are fearful (including fear of illness). However, the physical changes brought about by fear can make you more frightened.



List here any unhappy ideas which you find yourself dwelling on when you think about the consequences of being ill. How do they affect how you feel physically?





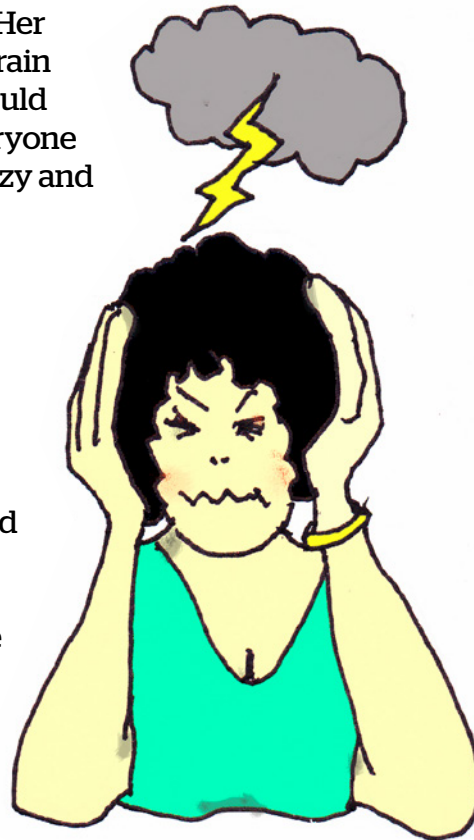
## AN EXAMPLE OF REASSURANCE

A woman with health anxiety went to her doctor with bad headaches. Her doctor said that it couldn't be a brain tumour, because if it was, she would feel dizzy from time to time. Everyone has moments when they feel dizzy and simply don't notice.

This woman started to notice dizziness (perhaps by focusing on her body) and became more convinced that she had a brain tumour.


The doctor had several very good reasons for thinking that this woman did not have a brain tumour, but only mentioned one of these so as not to confuse her.

The doctor had tried to be helpful, but the woman ended up more worried than before.



Please write any comments or questions you have about what you have read, especially ways you feel would help you move forward.

Every detail may not apply to you as an individual and some of your symptoms or worries may not be included. If this is the case, note down your comments and discuss them at your next session.



## PART 4: SEPARATING PHYSICAL SENSATIONS AND ILLNESS



### OVERVIEW:

**Not all changes in physical sensations are a sign of physical illness, but being anxious about health can mean you notice changes in your body more easily.**

**There are a number of causes of unusual physical sensations that are not related to disease:**

- 1. Natural Variation**
- 2. Physical symptoms of anxiety**
- 3. Over-breathing**
- 4. Natural sensations (eg tummy rumbling) that happen to everybody**
- 5. Side-effects from medicines**
- 6. Effects of diet**
- 7. Fatigue**
- 8. Physical fitness (and unfitness)**

**Several of these factors are likely to be important in explaining health anxiety.**



### When is a symptom not a symptom?

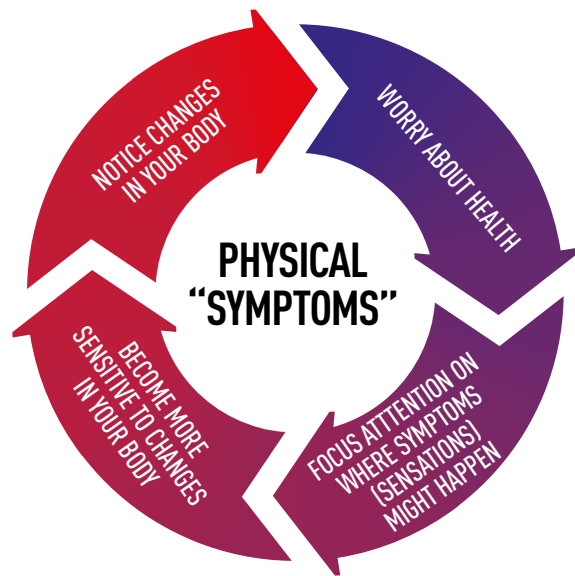
Noticing physical sensations is normal. We often talk about “symptoms” in our body, particularly if we are worried about them. The word, “symptom”, can be a problem, because symptoms are associated with disease. Using the word “symptom”, even just to ourselves, reminds us of the diseases we fear.

Many of the things that we think of as symptoms are actually bodily sensations, and have nothing to do with disease.

However, if you feel something happening in your body, it does not necessarily mean you have an illness. Physical “symptoms” are very common. Everybody is aware of physical “symptoms” every day; stiff joints, tingling feelings, palpitations, rumbling stomach, headaches and so on. In almost all cases these are not symptoms of any physical illness and can safely be ignored.

However, one of the effects of being anxious about your health is that you become more sensitive to such symptoms, and better at spotting them.

This can set up a vicious circle (displayed over the page) as we have discussed earlier:



### Causes of physical symptoms

Typical thoughts often expressed by people with health anxiety include:



You may wonder which illnesses people worry about unnecessarily. The answer is any serious and unpleasant illness. Certain illnesses do seem to cause more fear than others, usually because the effects are so unpleasant and frightening. For example: cancer, heart trouble and brain diseases.

When there is a lot of publicity about a disease, more people become afraid that they have it. An example of this was HIV/AIDS a few years ago. If you are looking for trouble, it is easier to find it.

The most important reason for unnecessary health anxiety is the misinterpretation of harmless physical symptoms or changes in your body.

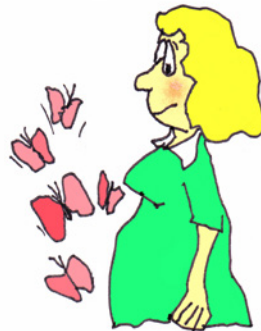
It is crucial to understand that physical symptoms do not have to be caused by an illness. This next section will explain common reasons for having physical symptoms.

## 1. Natural variation

Our bodies are not always the same, there are many fluctuations going on all the time. You will probably be able to remember times when you have had a symptom which has come on for no reason and gone away again. Research has shown that this happens to everybody and usually we take no notice of these symptoms. If we have health anxiety then we are likely to notice more of these variations and pay more attention to them than most people. We are also more likely to misinterpret these variations, thinking that they must be signs of illness.

## 2. Physical symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety itself can and does cause many physical symptoms. If you think back to a time when you were very tense, such as waiting to go into an exam or the dentist or waiting to hear some important news, try to recall any physical feelings you had. Often people are aware of their heart pounding, of butterflies in the stomach, dry mouth, muscle tension and many other sensations.



## 3. Over-breathing

When people get anxious they may also over-breathe or hyperventilate. Both of these terms just mean that the person is breathing more quickly than usual because they are worried. This can cause a whole range of physical symptoms, such as heart racing, feeling giddy, pins and needles and feeling dizzy. These sensations are only caused by over-breathing, they are not harmful in any way and are temporary.

## 4. Natural sensations

Our bodily functions are going on all the time without any need for us to be involved with them. Examples include rumbling in the tummy, feeling your heart beat faster, getting a stitch in your chest, and these are perfectly normal. But in health anxiety they are often interpreted as signs of disease.

## 5. Side-effects from medicines

This is a very common cause of physical sensations. There are a very large number of symptoms which can be caused by medications, both those which are prescribed by your doctor and those bought over the counter. Symptoms can also occur when people are discontinuing their medicines.

## 6. Effects of diet

Can you remember a time when you overate, had too much alcohol to drink, or had several cups of coffee? It is very likely that you experienced a number of uncomfortable physical symptoms.

## 7. Fatigue

Overwork, being physically tired, not getting enough sleep and so on, can make you feel strange in various ways.



## PART 5: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WAY YOU THINK

### 8. Physical fitness (and unfitness)

When we stop doing exercise we may feel unwell, and we can easily become unfit. Even when exercise is deliberately started again, unless it is done very gradually we can experience a wide range of aches and pains and other sensations. It is unlikely that just one of these causes could account for the way you have been feeling, but in most cases of health anxiety several of these factors are likely to be important. Often it needs only the slightest symptom to set off anxiety, leading to the sort of vicious circle we have discussed .



#### OVERVIEW:

**Certain ways of thinking maintain worries about health. This part explores different types of thinking errors:**

1. **Jumping to conclusions**
2. **Catastrophising**
3. **Superstitious thinking**
4. **Overgeneralising**
5. **Making false links**
6. **Ignoring the positive**
7. **Exaggerating**
8. **Selective attention and memory**
9. **All or nothing thinking**
10. **Certainty thinking**
11. **Preoccupation with health**
12. **Misunderstanding medical information**



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Negative thinking can make you feel anxious, depressed, angry, or some combination of these. Certain thinking errors are very important in maintaining health anxiety. See if you recognise any.

Types of thinking errors

### 1. Jumping to conclusions

When a symptom is noticed, the person immediately thinks that this means illness, without stopping to weigh up any other possible causes of the symptoms, for example:

“This pain is so bad, it must mean I’m ill.”

“I’m sweating more than I should in this hot spell, I must be ill.”

### 2. Catastrophizing

This means jumping to the worst conclusion. For example assuming there is an illness that is very serious or life-threatening. This can mean the person will assume that if they did have a condition it would be impossible to cure. For example:



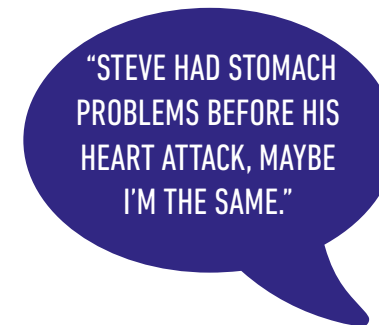
### 3. Superstitious thinking

The belief that worrying about your health somehow protects you from harm. For example:



### 4. Overgeneralising

This is a very common error. If someone hears about an illness or symptoms, they may assume that any similarities mean that they have it themselves. For example:



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## 5. Making false links

It is easy to get hold of the wrong information about health particularly on the internet and to assume that certain symptoms are linked with illnesses. For example:

A person might notice pins and needles in his arm and on looking up this symptom on the internet find that this can be a symptom of multiple sclerosis, but of course there are many other less serious causes – such as lying in a certain position.

## 6. Ignoring the positive

Assuming that an illness is present, whilst ignoring signs of good health.

## 7. Exaggerating

This error is to overestimate the chances of suffering a particular illness.

## 8. Selective attention and memory

Someone worried about an illness, tends to notice and remember information which fits with their worries. This makes them more convinced they are ill.

## 9. All or nothing

Thinking that the body can only be either entirely free from symptoms or physically ill. For example, viewing slight body variations as signs of illness.

## 10. Certainty thinking

No-one can be completely certain that they will not develop an illness. Aiming for this goal is impossible. Coping with uncertainty helps to overcome health anxiety. For example:

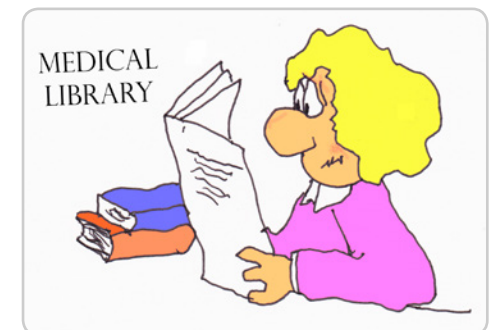


## 11. Preoccupation with health

Very little time is spent thinking of anything else.

## 12. Misunderstanding medical information

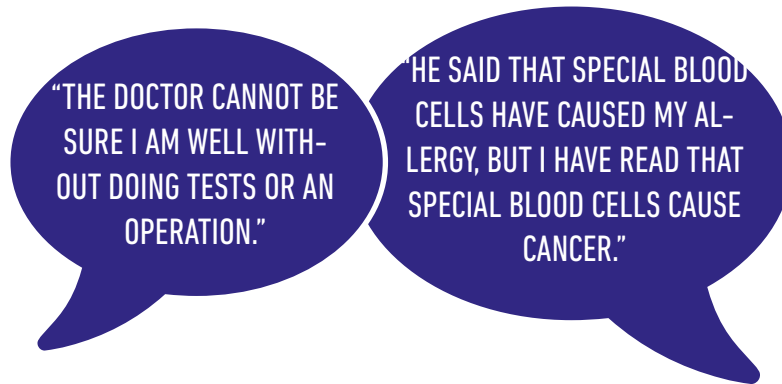
This is extremely common. In particular misunderstanding can arise from information found on the internet. It is hardly surprising that people may not fully understand information they have been given, especially if consultations are rushed.



## YOUR NOTES

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They may feel they have not been given a proper explanation for their symptoms and so do not feel reassured. For example:



### These thinking errors have some other characteristics

1. They become more believable the more worried you are.
2. They serve no useful function and interfere with your ability to control your actions. The more you accept them, the more anxious you feel.

**You can refer to this resource anytime you struggle with health anxiety in the future. Please note down anything of special importance to you on the following pages.**

**If you have any further queries please contact:**

✉ [ms-urgentcaretrial@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:ms-urgentcaretrial@nottingham.ac.uk)

☎ 0115 823 1439







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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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