



# Understanding **Health Anxiety**

## An introduction



We all experience worries about our health from time to time. This may be due to noticing new sensations in our body such as pains or tingling, or observing changes to our bodies, such as lumps or bumps. When this happens, we might worry that there could be a medical problem that has caused the changes. To a certain extent, it is completely reasonable to have these worries but if they start to impact on your everyday life and prevent you from going about your daily activities, then you might be experiencing what can be described as 'health anxiety'.

## Understanding health anxiety

### How do I know if health anxiety is a problem?

In some circumstances it is expected that you would be worried about your health. For example, while waiting for the results to come back from a medical test, it is natural that you may feel preoccupied with worries about what the results might be. So how do we know if what we are experiencing is health anxiety? Here are some signs that worries about your health might have become problematic:

- Worries are out-of-proportion to the actual risk of illness, e.g. experiencing a headache and then feeling high distress or a belief that you have a life-threatening illness.
- The worries are constant despite reassurance from your doctor that you do not have a serious illness or you may have a belief that tests are missing something.
- Belief that harmless physical sensations are indication of severe illness.
- You are struggling to continue to engage in your usual activities or your distress is stopping you from having as fulfilling a life as you usually would.
- The worries about your health are causing you to experience high amounts of anxiety or distress.
- You feel as if you have to engage in behaviours – such as seeking reassurance, checking for signs of illness or avoidance of certain places, topics or people – that stop you from your usual activities.
- You are experiencing intrusive thoughts or images involving illness.

“Health anxiety can impact your everyday life in a variety of ways”

**REMEMBER:** Those struggling with health anxiety:

MAY BE experiencing unexplained medical symptoms,  
MAY BE completely healthy or  
MAY HAVE a diagnosed medical condition.

It is irrelevant whether there is an actual medical cause for the symptoms or sensations you experience, the problem is the level of distress and the response to the distress experienced in relation to the symptoms.

## Impacts of health anxiety

Health anxiety can impact your everyday life in a variety of ways and may be a sign that you could benefit from professional support:

**Impact on work:** work may be interrupted or you might find it hard to concentrate when you are preoccupied with worries about health and illness. This can lead to decreased performance and increased stress.

**Cost of finances and time:** if worries about health and illness impact on work to a significant extent, this may result in a loss of income. It may cost time and money for someone to travel to doctor's appointments, explore alternative medicines or treatments, which may also impact on finances.

**Relationships:** relationships may become strained if health anxiety means you are constantly seeking reassurance from those around you that you are not seriously unwell. The worrying itself may mean that you have less time to dedicate to relationships and social life in general.

**Decreased quality of life:** when worries are significant and occur for a prolonged period of time, this can result in increased anxiety or an experience of low mood. You might begin to worry about other things which are not health related, or begin to notice physical feelings associated with anxiety such as digestive problems, stomach pains, headaches, fatigue, etc.



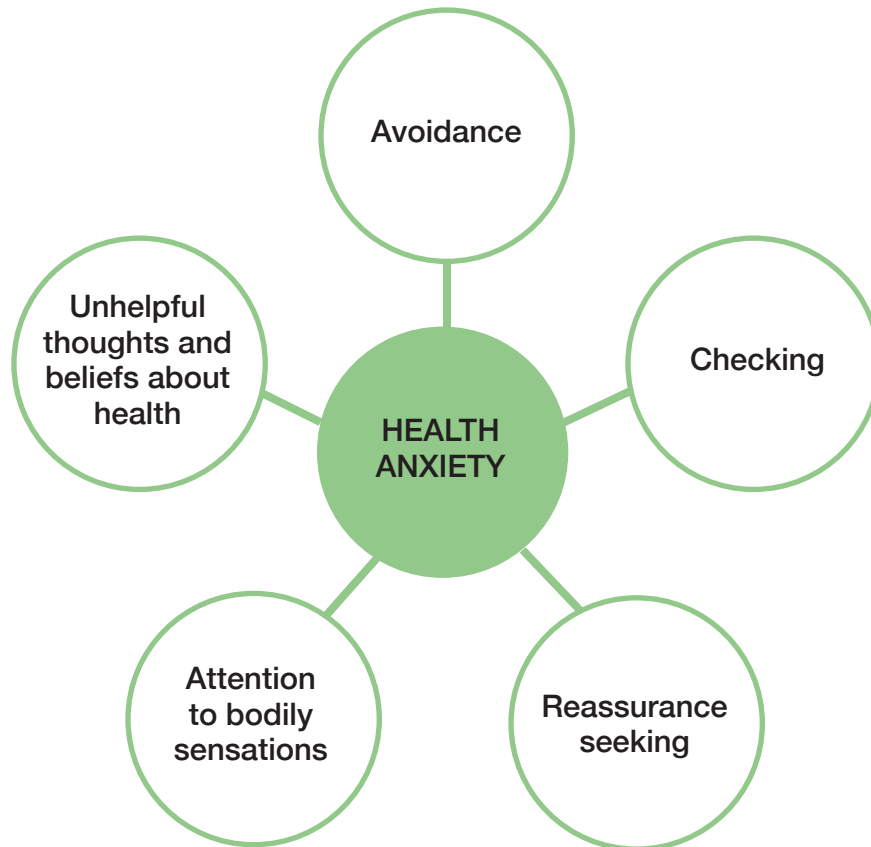
**Relationships can become strained if a health anxiety means you are constantly seeking reassurance from those around you**

**EXERCISE:** Consider how your health-related anxiety impacts on your life and try to visualise how your life might be different if you were to decrease your health anxiety.

## How does health anxiety develop?

It is generally thought that there is no single cause of health anxiety but rather a combination of factors which, when combined in the right circumstances, lead to anxiety around health and illness. It is thought that a genetic predisposition, in combination with predisposing factors (particularly an earlier experience regarding health issues or illness) and a significant trigger or event (such as a health scare or other stressful period) can increase the likelihood of developing health anxiety by increasing our sensitivity to normal bodily sensations and increasing the likelihood of experiencing worry about the physical sensations themselves.





A 'vicious cycle of health anxiety' can then develop (see *diagram above*), in which worries about health can increase anxiety and the physical response to anxiety (e.g. increased heart rate, feeling warm and flushed, quickened breathing) may also be interpreted as illness.

**Diagram showing the 'vicious cycle' of health anxiety**

## What keeps health anxiety going?

Like other anxiety-based distress, it is thought that unhelpful thinking processes and behaviours can keep the cycle of health anxiety going.

Each part of the vicious cycle are described in more detail below:

## **1. Attention/focus on bodily sensations**

The more attention we pay to something, the more we notice what we are attending to. If we notice a body sensation or a change in our physical state and then focus on it, this can actually increase our experience of it. For example, if you notice a 'noisy tummy' and begin to focus on it, you might become more aware of it and it might seem to become 'noisier'. The more we attend to something, the more it will fill our minds and become more powerful.

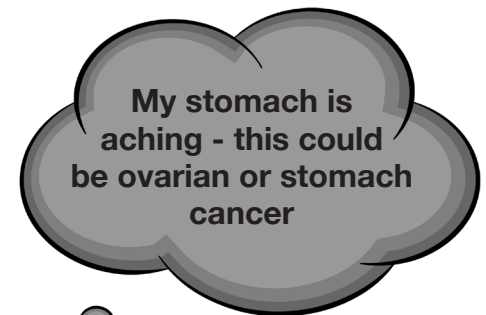
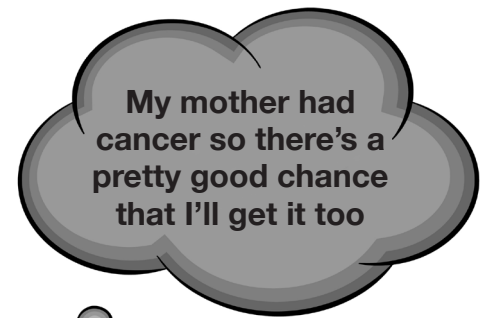
## **2. Unhelpful thoughts and beliefs**

If you are struggling with health anxiety you may believe there is a greater threat to your health than there actually is. This doesn't mean that you are imagining the symptoms – those symptoms are real! But if you interpret or think about the symptoms in a catastrophic way, this will often bring about intense negative feelings and sensations in your body. For example, you may be more likely to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that you have or will develop a serious health problem
- Overestimate how bad things will be
- Ignore or discount other possible (and often less catastrophic) explanations for your symptoms
- Underestimate your ability to treat, cope with, or manage a health problem

Here are some examples of common thoughts experienced by people with health anxiety:

- My mother had cancer so there's a pretty good chance I'll get it too
- My heart is racing - I am going to have a heart attack
- My stomach is aching - this could be ovarian or stomach cancer
- I've been having weird thoughts - I could be schizophrenic and not know it
- I've never seen this mole before - it could be a melanoma
- I've had diarrhoea for three days - this could be colon cancer
- I have a headache - this must be a brain tumour or an aneurism
- My knees hurt - I must have arthritis
- I keep forgetting things - this might be the start of dementia
- I've been feeling really weak lately - this could be a sign of multiple sclerosis



Sometimes, people will try to manage distressing health-related thoughts by suppressing them. Unfortunately, this can often have the opposite effect and make the thought more intrusive.

### 3. Checking and reassurance seeking

Although some checking of our bodies is helpful and actually recommended by health professionals (e.g. checking skin for any changes, checking breasts or testicles), excessive checking can actually be unhelpful. People experiencing health anxiety tend to find that checking and reassurance seeking does not help their anxiety long term and may actually increase their anxiety. For example, repeated checking of a body part or sensation can actually increase doubt, which leads to more checking. The process of checking might involve repeated pressing or touching of a certain area, which can then cause it to be more tender or sore, which can then be misunderstood as another symptom of illness.

Seeking reassurance from others (e.g. the doctor, friends, or family, Google) can help in the short term but it can keep the 'vicious cycle' going by reducing our ability to self-reassure and can also draw our attention to the bodily sensations.

### 4. Avoidance

It is natural to want to avoid things that cause us to worry or feel anxious. With health anxiety, you might do this by avoiding events (doctors appointments); people (those who are unwell or may talk about illness); or places (hospitals, dentist) in order to manage the anxiety. You may also avoid anything that could alter physical sensations that might mimic or cause illness, such as exercise or avoiding certain foods such as coffee or spicy foods.

Although avoidance can help reduce anxiety in the short term, in the long term it is unhelpful as it prevents you from learning about the situation and your ability to cope (e.g. that you can sit for periods of time without developing a blood clot or that you can hear about illness and manage your anxiety).

“It is natural to want to avoid things that cause us to worry or feel anxious.”

**EXERCISE:** Make a note of the types of checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance behaviours that you use. Then, have a go at the techniques in the next section to see if you can challenge your thoughts or decrease your safety behaviours.

# Managing health anxiety

## Reducing focus on sensations

Refocusing your attention away from your bodily sensations can be helpful in decreasing the intensity of the sensations. One way you can do this is by practising mindfulness techniques, which will help you to dis-engage from your sensations and thoughts and focus on the present moment.

You can use exercises that help you to connect with your environment and notice what is going on around you, or by practising activities mindfully such as mindful cooking, exercising mindfully, playing mindfully. If you want to try some mindfulness exercises have a look at our *Mindfulness Booklet*.

When you are practising mindfulness, you can observe and manage your thoughts and catch them when they start to run away towards worst case scenarios. You may find this particularly helpful when there are a lot of things your mind could run away with concerning your health. But mindfulness helps you hold your focus on what you choose – which gives your body and mind a rest from the anxious thoughts you may be experiencing. Even more importantly, the continued practice of focusing the mind on the present builds a muscle of resilience that will help you time and time again. When we practise bringing ourselves back to the present moment, we strengthen our ability to cope with all sorts of crises, whether global or personal.

There are plenty of free apps available to help calm your mind and start your own mindfulness journey, here are a couple to get you started:

- [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com)
- [www.headspace.com/mindfulness](http://www.headspace.com/mindfulness)

“When you are practising mindfulness, you can observe and manage your thoughts and catch them when they start to run away towards worst case scenarios.”

## Addressing unhelpful thoughts and beliefs

To determine if a belief you have about health or illness is unhelpful or unrealistic, it can be useful to weigh up the evidence ‘for’ and ‘against’ how true or helpful a thought really is.

One way to address unhelpful health related thoughts is to challenge them head on. Remember that our thoughts are just that, thoughts. Sometimes our thoughts will be accurate, sometimes they will be somewhat correct, and sometimes they will not accurately represent the reality of the situation at all. The only way we can work out how accurate our thoughts really are is to question them and evaluate them.



A helpful way to think about this is to imagine that you are a detective, collecting evidence for and against a case, considering other possible causes and explanations, and trying to work out the most accurate and likely explanation. Evaluating these thoughts isn't something you should try to do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down following the process below:



**Evaluating your thoughts can be really helpful. The best way to do this is to write them down.**

#### **Step 1: What was the trigger?**

What triggered off this episode of health anxiety?

#### **Step 2: What thoughts are you having?**

- What am I worrying about?
- What am I predicting?
- What conclusions am I jumping to?

#### **Step 3: Challenge your thoughts**

After you have written down your thoughts, you may want to ask yourself these questions to challenge these types of thoughts:

- What is the factual evidence for this thought?
- What is the factual evidence against this thought?  
(Note: Be sure to include only good quality evidence, not biased evidence or poorly researched opinions)
- How does it affect me when I expect the worst?
- What could I do to cope if 'the worst' did happen?
- Are there any other possible explanations for my symptoms, or for my doctor's response?
- What is the most likely explanation?
- What can I do to cope with this symptom or situation right now?

#### **Step 4: What might be a more realistic thought**

The ultimate aim of doing this is for you to develop more realistic health related thoughts. Once you have explored the answers to the above 'challenging' questions, ask yourself:

- What would be a more realistic thought about this symptom or situation?



## Reducing safety behaviours

Avoidance, checking and reassurance seeking are all safety behaviours that can help to maintain your anxiety as it teaches your brain that the thoughts you are worried about are: important, definitely true, and definitely a threat to you. It also teaches your brain that you are unable to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty that these thoughts activate without engaging in your safety behaviours.

Accordingly, to help reduce your health anxiety we want to teach your brain the opposite: that your thoughts may or may not be true, that they are not important, that they are not a threat to you, and that you can cope with the anxiety caused by not carrying out your safety behaviours.

In order to do that, you will want to start reducing and eventually stopping your safety behaviours, as well as learning how to tolerate your anxiety. You can make a plan of what behaviours you are going to reduce and how, and take your time. If it is too difficult you are starting off with something too

**Safety behaviours such as checking yourself in the mirror regularly teach your brain that the thoughts you are worried about are important**

challenging. If it is too easy you are starting off with something that is not challenging enough. You may need to start off smaller or go bigger to have the most success.

To help you with this you may want to create a hierarchy of safety behaviours. Which behaviours do you NEED to do and which one's are not as important to you? Which behaviours do you need to do the most, and which ones do you need to do the least? To start reducing your safety behaviours, it can be helpful to start off with those that will cause you the least anxiety to stop or those that you do the least. For example, you may find checking your body with your hands every day very important and know that you would be extremely anxious if you didn't do this, whereas if you didn't check your body in the mirror every day you would not be as anxious. By stopping or reducing some of these behaviours you will begin to realise that the anxiety that arises will start to go away by itself, without the need for these behaviours.



**TIP:** If you're struggling cope with your anxiety before it reduces by itself, give yourself some encouragement: "I can do this! This is tough, but it is going to be worth it."

Reducing your safety behaviours also teaches your brain that what you were worried about wasn't that important. You can build up to reducing or stopping your most important safety behaviour, however this is often easier with the help and support of a therapist if your anxiety is very high.

**TIP:** If you are struggling to reduce behaviours because the advantages of checking outweigh the disadvantages, you may want to focus on all the ways your health anxiety and checking behaviours negatively impact your life and what your life could be like without this anxiety. This can help motivate you to tolerate the anxiety that will come up when you reduce your checking behaviours because you know it will be worth it in the end!

## Key points

- Now and then, we all experience worries about our health. Health anxiety refers to the experience when these worries start to interfere with your life or cause you distress.
- Health anxiety can have an impact on relationships, work, study, and finances and result in a decreased quality of life.
- A variety of factors contribute to the development of health anxiety including genetics, life events, and other stressors.
- The 'vicious cycle of health anxiety' is kept going by attention to bodily sensations, unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, checking and reassurance seeking, and avoidance and safety behaviours.
- By addressing each of the components of the 'vicious cycle of health anxiety', you can begin to tackle the cycle and reduce the distress associated with worries about health and illness.



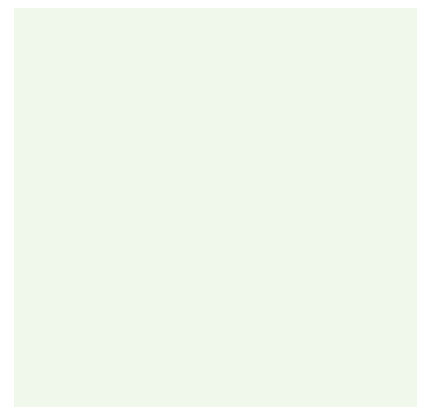
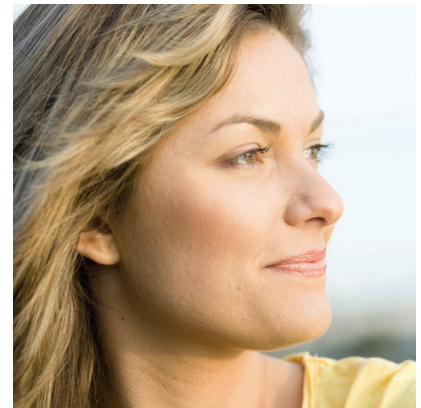
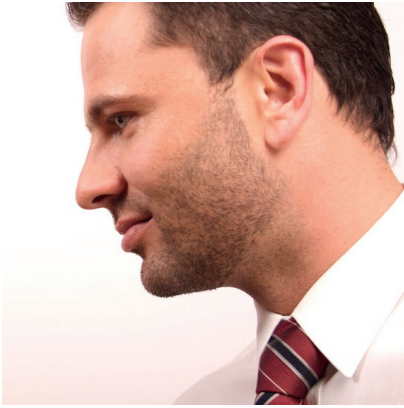
Our highly qualified and experienced team at First Psychology offers a variety of therapy services and works with people with a wide range of issues and problems including health anxiety.

We provide:

- Therapy and coaching services for women, men, couples, children, young people and families.
- Employee counselling, CBT & psychological therapies; promotion of wellbeing in the workplace; and rehabilitation and personal injury support.

All First Psychology practitioners have excellent qualifications and experience, so you can come to us knowing that you will see an experienced professional.





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